Claude Tillier

My Uncle Benjamin

Illustrated by
Emil Pretorius

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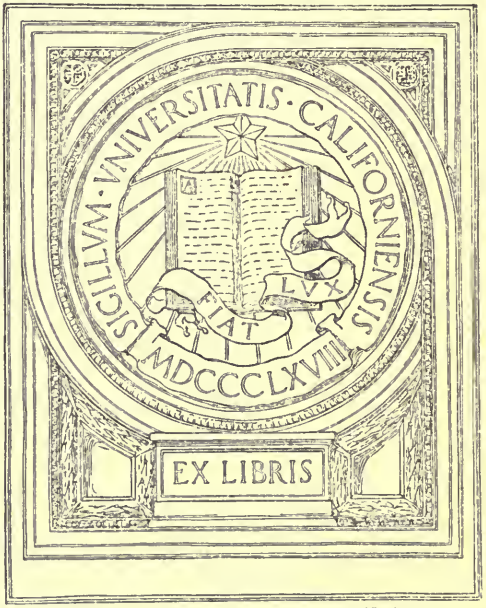

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MY UNCLE BENJAMIN

Claude Tillier

MY UNCLE BENJAMIN

BY CLAUDE TILLIER

TRANSLATED BY ADELE SZOLD SELTZER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY EMIL PREETORIUS

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MY UNCLE BENJAMIN

CHAPTER I

WHO MY UNCLE WAS

I REALLY do not know why human beings cling so tenaciously to life. What great pleasure do they find in this vapid succession of days and nights, of winter and spring? Always the same sky, the same sun; always the same green pastures and the same green fields; always the same political discussions, the same rogues and the same dupes. If this is the best that God can do, he is a sorry workman. The scene-shifter at the Grand Opera can do better than he.

More personalities, you say. There you are indulging in personalities against God. What of it? It is true that God is a functionary, and a high functionary at that, although his office is not a sinecure. But I am not afraid that he will bring suit against me for damages, and build a church with the proceeds to compensate himself for the injury that I may have done his honour.

I know very well that the gentlemen of the law are more sensitive about his reputation than he is himself. But that is exactly what I regard as evil. By what title do these men in black arrogate to

themselves the right to avenge injuries which are wholly personal to him? Do they hold a power of attorney signed "Jehovah" giving them this authority?

Do you believe that he is highly pleased when the police magistrates take his thunderbolts in their own hands and hurl them brutally at some poor devils for an offence of a few syllables? Moreover, what proof have these gentlemen that God has been offended? There he is in the court-room fastened to his cross, while they sit comfortably in their arm-chairs. Let them question him. If he answers in the affirmative, I will admit that I am wrong. Do you know why he has overthrown the dynasty of the Capets, that ancient august salad of kings, soaked through and through with holy oil? I know, and I am going to tell you. It is because they enacted the law against sacrilege.

But this is not to the point.

What is it to live? To rise, to go to bed, to breakfast, to dine, and begin all over again the next day. When one has done these things for forty years, it finally becomes a bore.

Men resemble spectators, some sitting on velvet, others on bare boards, by far the greater number standing, who witness the same drama every evening, and yawn every one of them till they almost split their jaws. They all agree that it is mortally tiresome and yet no one is willing to give up his place.

To live—is it worth the trouble of opening one's eyes for? All we ever do is but a beginning. The house we build is for our heirs; the dressing-gown we so fondly pad to envelop our old age will be made into swaddling clothes for our grandchildren. We say to ourselves: "There, the day is ended!" We light our lamp, we poke up our fire, we get ready to pass a pleasant peaceful evening at the corner of our fireplace. Ra-ta-ta! Some one is knocking at the door. Who is there? Death. We must go. When we have all the appetites of youth, when our blood is full of iron and alcohol, we are without a cent. When our teeth and stomach are gone, we are millionaires. We have barely time to say to a woman, "I love you." At our second kiss she is old and decrepit. Empires are no sooner consolidated than they begin to crumble. They are like those ant-hills which the poor insects build with great effort. When it requires but one grain more to finish them, an ox crushes it under his broad foot or a cart under its wheel. What you call the vegetable layer of this globe is but a heap of shrouds, thousands and thousands of them laid one on top of the other by successive generations. Those great names which reverberate in men's mouths, the names of capitals, monarchs, and generals, are but the clattering ruins of old empires. You cannot take a step without raising about you the dust of a thousand things destroyed before they were finished.

I am forty years old, I have already passed

through four professions; I have been a monitor, a soldier, a school-teacher, and now I am a journalist. I have been on land and on sea, under tents and by the fireside, behind prison bars and in the free wide world; I have obeyed and I have commanded; I have had moments of wealth and years of poverty. I have been loved and I have been hated; I have been applauded and I have been ridiculed. I have been a son and a father, a lover and a husband; I have passed through the season of flowers and through the season of fruits, as the poets say. In none of these circumstances have I found any reason to congratulate myself on being enclosed in the skin of a man rather than in that of a wolf or a fox, or in the shell of an oyster, the bark of a tree, or the jacket of a potato. Perhaps if I were a rich man with an income of fifty thousand francs, I should think differently.

In the meantime, my opinion is that a man is a machine made expressly for suffering. He has only five senses through the whole surface of his body. In whatever spot he is pricked, he bleeds; in whatever spot he is burned, he gets a blister. The lungs, the liver, the bowels can give him no pleasure. But the lungs become inflamed and make him cough; the liver becomes obstructed and throws him into a fever; the bowels gripe and give him the colic. There is not a nerve, a muscle, a sinew under your skin that cannot make you howl with pain.

Your machinery is thrown out of gear every mo-

ment like a bad pendulum. You raise your eyes to heaven to invoke it, and a swallow's dung falls into them and sears them. You go to a ball, and you sprain your ankle and have to be carried home on a stretcher. To-day you are a great writer, a great philosopher, a great poet; a thread in your brain snaps; they bleed you, put ice on your head—in vain—to-morrow you will be only a poor madman.

Sorrow lurks behind all your pleasures; you are greedy rats whom it attracts with a bit of savory bacon. You are in your shady garden, and cry out, "Oh! what a beautiful rose!" and the rose pricks you; "Oh! what a beautiful pear!" there is a wasp on it, and the pear stings you.

You say, "God has made us to serve and to love him." It is not true. He has made us to suffer. The man who does not suffer is a badly-made machine, a defective creature, a moral cripple, one of nature's abortions. Death is not only the end of life, it is its cure. One is nowhere so well off as in the grave. If you believe me, you will order a coffin instead of a new overcoat. It is the only garment that does not make you feel uncomfortable.

You may take what I have said to you as philosophy or as paradox; it is all one to me, I assure you. But I pray you at least to accept it as a preface, for I could not make you a better one, or one more suitable to the sad and lamentable story which I am going to have the honour to relate to you.

You will permit me to trace my story back to the

second generation, as they do in the funeral oration over a prince, or a hero. Perhaps you will not lose thereby. The customs of that time were worth just as much as ours. The people carried chains, but they danced with them, and made them rattle like castanets.

For, mark you, gaiety always keeps company with servitude. It is a blessing for those who are subject to a master, or who are under the hard and heavy hand of poverty. He has given them this blessing as consolation for their miseries, just as he has made certain grasses to grow between the pavements that we tread under our feet, certain birds to sing on the old towers, and the beautiful verdure of the ivy to smile on wry-faced, tumble-down hovels.

Gaiety flies, like the swallow, above the splendid roofs of the great. It stops in the schoolyards, at the doors of barracks, on the mouldy flaggings of prisons. It alights like a beautiful butterfly on the pen of a schoolboy scrawling his exercises in his copybook. It hobnobs at the canteen with the old grenadiers. And never does it sing so loud—provided they let it sing—as between the dark walls in which they shut up the unfortunates.

Besides, the gaiety of the poor is a sort of pride. I have been poor among the poorest. Well, I found pleasure in saying to fortune, "I will not bend under your hand; I will eat my hard crust as proudly as the dictator Fabricius ate his radishes; I will wear my poverty as kings wear their diadem. Strike as

hard as you like, and strike again—I will answer your blows with sarcasms; I will be like the tree that puts forth flowers while they are cutting at its roots; like the column whose metal eagle shines in the sun while the pick is at its base."

Dear readers, be content with these explanations; I can furnish you none more reasonable.

What a difference between that age and ours! The man of the constitutional régime cannot laugh, he is absolutely incapable of fun.

He is hypocritical, avaricious, and profoundly selfish. Whatever question strikes against his brow, his brow rings like a drawer full of big pennies.

He is pretentious and bloated with vanity. The grocer calls the confectioner his neighbour, his honourable friend, and the confectioner begs the grocer to accept the assurance of the distinguished consideration with which he has the honour to be, etc., etc.

The man of the constitutional régime has a mania for wishing to distinguish himself from the people. The father wears a blue cotton blouse and the son an Elbeuf cloak. No sacrifice is too costly to the man of the constitutional régime to satisfy his mania for appearing to be somebody. He lives on bread and water, he dispenses with fire in winter and beer in summer, in order to have a coat made of fine cloth, a cashmere waistcoat, and yellow gloves. When others regard him as respectable, he regards himself as great.

He is stiff and formal; he does not raise his voice,

he does not laugh aloud, he does not know where to spit. His gestures are all alike. He says very promptly, "How do you do, sir." "How do you do, madam." That is good behavior. Now, what is good behavior? A lying varnish spread on a piece of wood to make it pass for a cane. One must behave that way in the presence of the ladies. Very well; but how must one behave in the presence of God?

He is pedantic, he makes up for lack of wit by purism of language, as a good housewife makes up for lack of furniture by order and cleanliness.

He is always on a low diet. If he attends a banquet, he is silent and preoccupied, he swallows a cork for a piece of bread, and uses the cream for the white sauce. He waits till a toast is proposed before he drinks. He always has a newspaper in his pocket, he talks only of commercial treaties and railway lines, and laughs only in the Chamber of Deputies.

But at the period to which I take you back the customs of the little towns were not yet glossed over with elegance; they were full of a charming ease and freedom and a lovely simplicity.

The characteristic of that happy age was unconcern. All these men, whether ships or nutshells, abandoned themselves with closed eyes to the current of life, without troubling where they would land.

The bourgeois were not office-seekers; they did not hoard money; they lived at home in joyous abundance, and spent their incomes to the last louis. The merchants, few in number then, grew rich

slowly, without doing very much, and only in the natural order of things. The labourers worked, not to amass savings, but to make both ends meet. They had not at their heels that terrible competition which drives us, and cries to us incessantly: "On! On!" Consequently they took their ease. They had supported their fathers, and, when they were old, their children in turn would support them.

Such was the ease and unconstraint of this society that all the lawyers and even the judges went to the tavern, and there publicly indulged in orgies. To prevent it from being unknown they would gladly have hung their caps on the tavern sign. All these people, great and small alike, seemed to have no other business than to amuse themselves. They exercised their ingenuity in playing some good joke or in concocting some good story. Those who then had wit, instead of expending it in intrigues, expended it in pleasantries.

The idlers, and there were many of them, gathered in the public square. The market-days were days of fun for them. The peasants who came to bring their provisions to the town were their victims, on whom they played the funniest, cleverest practical jokes. All the neighbours flocked there for their part of the show. The police magistrates today would regard such things as matters to be prosecuted, but the court officials of that time enjoyed these burlesque scenes as well as anybody, and often took part in them.

My grandfather was a process-server. My grandmother was a little woman who was teased for not being able to see whether the holy-water basin in church was full. She has remained in my memory as a little girl of sixty. By the time she had been married six years, she had five children, some boys and some girls. They all lived on my grandfather's miserable fees and got along marvellously well. The seven of them dined off three herrings, but they had plenty of bread and wine, for my grandfather had a vineyard which was an inexhaustible source of white wine. All these children were utilized by my grandmother according to their age and strength. The oldest, who was my father, was named Gaspard. He washed the dishes and went to the butcher shop. There was no poodle in the town better tamed than he. The next to oldest child swept the room. The third child held the fourth in his arms. And the fifth rocked in its cradle. Meantime my grandmother was at church, or at her neighbour's, chatting. All went well, however; they managed, so-so, to reach the end of the year without getting into debt The boys were strong, the girls were not bad-looking, and the father and mother were happy.

My uncle Benjamin lived at his sister's. He was five feet ten inches in height, carried a big sword at his side, and wore a coat of scarlet ratteen, breeches of the same colour and material, pearl-grey silk stockings, and shoes with silver buckles. Over his coat

M. Rathery

hung a large black queue almost as long as his sword. It kept bobbing about and covered him with powder, so that his coat, with its shades of red and white, looked like an unbaked brick. My uncle was a doctor. That's why he carried a sword. I do not know whether the patients had much confidence in him, but he, Benjamin, had very little confidence in medicine. He often said that a doctor did very well if he did not kill his patient. Whenever my uncle Benjamin got a franc or two, he went to buy a big fish and gave it to his sister to make a chowder, upon which the entire family feasted. My uncle Benjamin, according to all who knew him, was the gayest, funniest, wittiest man in all the country round, and he would have been the most—how shall I say it without failing in respect to my great uncle's memory?—he would have been the least sober, if the town drummer, named Cicero, had not shared his glory.

Nevertheless my Uncle Benjamin was not what you lightly term a drunkard, make no mistake about that. He was an epicurean who pushed philosophy to the point of intoxication—that was all. He had a supremely elevated and noble stomach. He loved wine, not for itself, but for the short-lived madness which it brings, a madness which makes a man of wit talk nonsense in so naïve, piquant, and original a way that one would like to talk that way always. If he could have intoxicated himself by reading the mass, he would have read the mass every day. My uncle Benjamin had principles. He maintained that a fast-

ing man was a man still asleep; that intoxication would have been one of the greatest blessings of the Creator, if it did not cause headache, and that the only thing that made man superior to the brute was the faculty of getting drunk.

Reason, said my uncle, is nothing. It is simply the power of feeling present evils and remembering past ones. The privilege of renouncing one's reason—that's something. You say that the man who drowns his reason in wine brutalizes himself. It is the pride of caste that makes you think so. Do you really believe that the condition of the brute is worse than your own? When you are tormented by hunger, you would like very much to be the ox that grazes in grass up to his belly. When you are in prison, you would like very much to be the bird that cleaves the azure of the skies with a free wing. When you are on the point of being dispossessed, you would like very much to be the ugly snail whose right to its shell no one ever disputes.

The equality of which you dream, the brute possesses. In the forests there are neither kings, nor nobles, nor a third estate. The problem of communal life which your philosophers seek in vain to unravel was solved thousands of centuries ago by the poor insects, the ants, and the bees. The animals have no doctors; they are neither blind, nor hump-backed, nor lame, nor bow-legged, and they have no fear of hell.

My uncle Benjamin was twenty-eight years old

He had been practising medicine for three years, but medicine brought him no income, far from it. He owed his tailor for three scarlet coats and his barber for three years of hair-dressing, and in each of the most famous taverns of the town he had a pretty little account running, with nothing on the credit side but a few drugs.

My grandmother was three years older than Benjamin. She had rocked him on her knees and carried him in her arms, and she looked upon herself as his mentor. She bought his cravats and pocket-handkerchiefs, mended his shirts and gave him good advice, to which—we must do him this justice—he listened very attentively, but of which he did not make the slightest use.

Every evening regularly, after supper, she urged him to get married.

"Faugh!" said Benjamin. "To have six children like Machecourt"—that was the way he called my grandfather—"and dine off the fins of a herring?"

"But, you pauper, you would at least have bread."

"Yes, bread, which will rise too much to-day, not enough to-morrow, and the day after will have the measles! Bread! What is bread? It is good to keep one from dying, but it is not good to keep one living. I shall be far gone indeed when I shall have a wife to tell me that I put too much sugar in my vials and too much powder on my queue, to come to look for me at the tavern, to go through my pockets

when I am asleep, and to buy three cloaks for herself to one coat that I buy for myself."

"But your creditors, Benjamin, how are you going to pay them?"

"In the first place, as long as one has credit, it is the same as if he were rich, and when your creditors are kneaded of the right kind of dough, if they are patient, it is the same as if you had none. Besides, what do I need to enable me to square my accounts? A first-class epidemic. God is good, my dear sister, and will not leave a man who repairs his finest work in embarrassment."

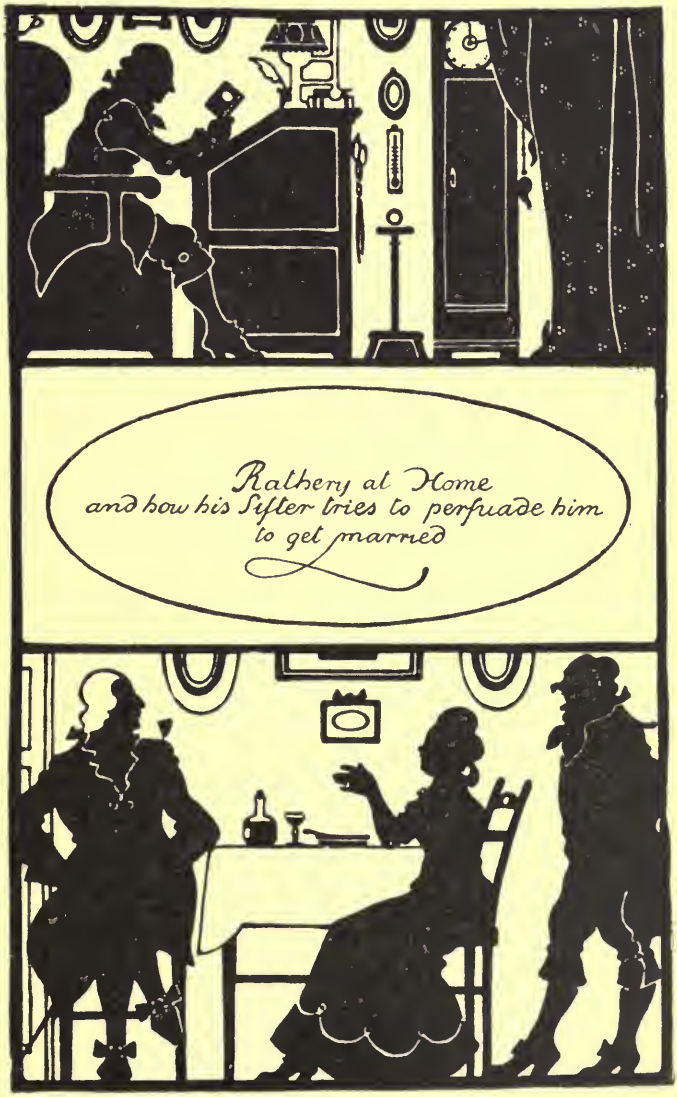
"Yes," said my grandfather, "and a man who puts it so out of commission that it has to be buried in the ground."

"Well," replied my uncle, "that is the good of doctors; without them the world would be too populous. Of what use would it be for God to take the trouble to send us diseases if men could be found to cure them?"

"In that case you are a dishonest man; you rob those who send for you."

"No, I do not rob them, because I reassure them, I give them hope, and I always find a way to make them laugh. That is worth a good deal."

My grandmother, seeing that the subject of the conversation had changed, decided to drop off asleep.


Rathery at Home
and how his Sister tries to perfuade him
to get married

CHAPTER II

WHY MY UNCLE DECIDED TO MARRY

A TERRIBLE catastrophe, of which I shall have the honour to tell you presently, shook Benjamin's resolutions.

One day my cousin Page, a lawyer in the bailiwick of Clamecy, came and invited him and Machecourt to a celebration of Saint Yves. The dinner was to take place at a well-known tavern within two gun-shots of the faubourg. The guests were a select party. Benjamin would not have given that evening for a whole week of his ordinary life. So after vespers, my grandfather, dressed in his wedding coat, and my uncle with his sword at his side, presented themselves at the rendezvous.

Almost all the guests were already assembled. Saint Yves was magnificently represented in the gathering. In the first place, lawyer Page was there, who never pleaded a case except between two glasses of wine; and then there was the clerk of the court, who had learned to write while asleep; and the government attorney Rapin, who had received a half hogshead of sour wine from a litigant, and then had him summoned to appear at court so as to get a

better one; and the notary Arthus, who had once eaten a whole salmon for his dessert; Millot-Rataut, poet and tailor, author of *Grand Noël;* an old architect, who had not been sober for twenty years; M. Minxit, a doctor of the neighbourhood, who examined urines; two or three prominent business men—prominent for their gaiety and appetite; and some sportsmen, who had provided the table with an abundance of game. At sight of Benjamin all the guests uttered a shout of welcome, and declared it was time to sit down to table. During the first two courses all went well. My uncle was charming with his wit and his sallies. But at dessert the heads grew heated; all commenced shouting at once. Soon the conversation was nothing but a confusion of epigrams, oaths, and sallies, bursting out together and trying to stifle each other, the whole making a noise like that of a dozen glasses striking against each other simultaneously.

"Gentlemen," cried Page, the lawyer, "I must entertain you with my last speech in court. The case was this. Two donkeys had got into a fight in a meadow. The owner of one, good-for-nothing scamp that he was, ran, took a stick and beat the other donkey. But this quadruped would not stand for it, and bit our man on his little finger. The owner of the donkey that inflicted the bite was cited before the bailiff as responsible for the doings of his beast.

"I was counsel for the defendant. 'Before com-

ing to the question of fact,' said I to the bailiff, 'I must enlighten you as to the moral character of the donkey that I defend and of that of the plaintiff. Our donkey is an entirely inoffensive quadruped; he enjoys the esteem of all who know him, and the town constable holds him in high regard. Now, I defy the man who is our adversary to say as much of his. Our donkey is the bearer of a certificate from the mayor of his commune'—this certificate really existed—'which testifies to his morality and good conduct. If the plaintiff can produce a like certificate, we will consent to pay him three thousand francs damages.' "

"May Saint Yves bless you!" said my uncle. "Now the poet, Millot-Rataut, must sing us his *Grand Noël*:

'Down on your knees, O Christians, down!'

"That is eminently lyrical. No one but the Holy Spirit could have inspired that beautiful line."

"I should like to see you do as much," cried the tailor, who was very irascible under the influence of Burgundy.

"I am not so stupid," answered my uncle.

"Silence!" interrupted Page, the lawyer, striking on the table with all his might. "I declare to the court that I wish to finish my plea."

"Directly," said my uncle, "you are not drunk enough yet to plead."

"And I tell you I will plead now. Who are you, old five-foot-ten, to prevent a lawyer from talking?"

"Be careful, Page," exclaimed Arthus, the notary, "you are only a man of the pen, and you are dealing with a man of the sword."

"It is quite becoming to you, a man of the fork and a devourer of salmon, to talk of men of the sword. Before you could frighten anybody, he would have to be cooked."

"Benjamin is really terrible," said the architect. "He is like the lion; at one stroke of his queue he can knock a man down."

"Gentlemen," said my grandfather, rising, "I will answer for my brother-in-law. He has never shed blood except with his lancet."

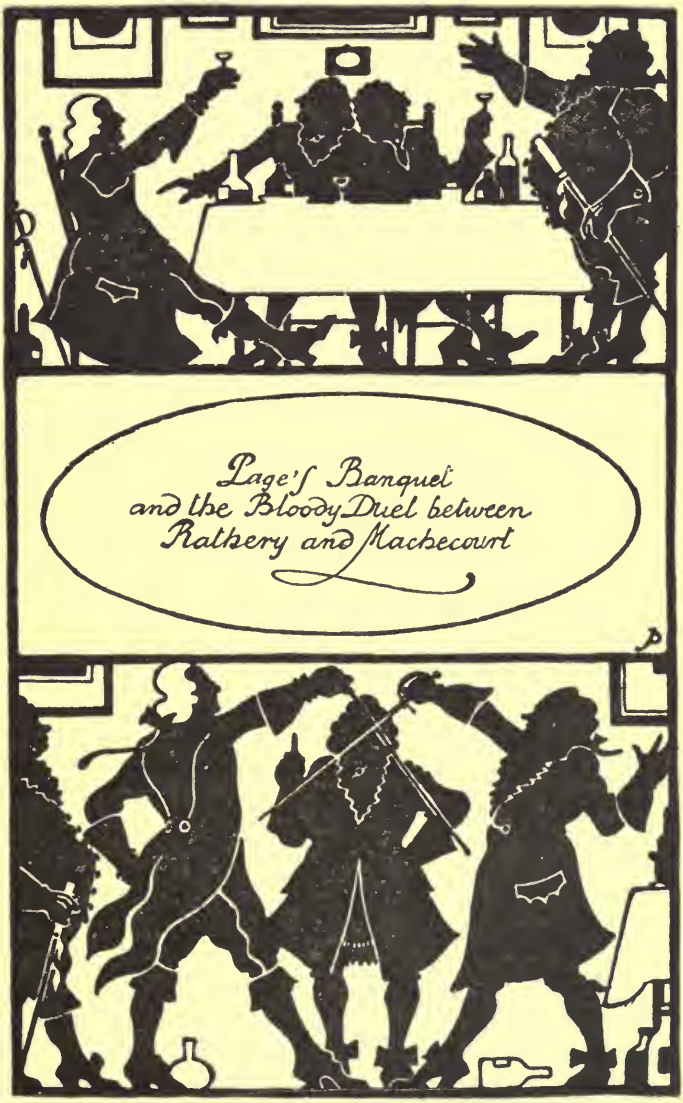
"Do you really dare to maintain that, Machecourt?"

"And you, Benjamin, do you really dare to maintain the contrary?"

"Then you shall give me satisfaction on the instant for this insult; and, as we have but one sword here, which is mine, I will keep the scabbard, and you shall take the blade."

My grandfather, who was very fond of his brother-in-law, did not want to contradict him, and so accepted the proposition. As the two adversaries rose, Page, the lawyer, said:

"One moment, gentlemen. We must fix the conditions of the combat. I propose that each of the two


Page's Banquet
and the Bloody Duel between
Rathery and Machecourt

adversaries shall hold on to the arm of his second, in order that he may not fall before it is time."

"Agreed!" cried all the guests.

Benjamin and Machecourt stood face to face.

"Are you there, Benjamin?"

"And you, Machecourt?"

With the first stroke of his sword my grandfather cut Benjamin's scabbard in two as if it had been an oyster plant, and made a gash upon his wrist, which must have reduced him to drink with his left hand for at least a week.

"The clumsy fellow!" cried Benjamin. "He has cut me."

"Well," answered my grandfather, with charming simplicity, "why have you a sword that cuts?"

"All the same, I still want my revenge; and the half of this scabbard I have left is enough to make you beg my pardon."

"No, Benjamin," rejoined my grandfather, "it is your turn to take the sword. If you stick me, we shall be even, and we will quit playing."

The guests, sobered by the accident, wanted to return to town.

"No, gentlemen," cried Benjamin, in his stentorian voice, "let each one return to his seat. I have a proposition to make to you. Considering that it was his first attempt, Machecourt has conducted himself most brilliantly. He is in a position to measure himself against the most murderous of barbers, provided the latter will yield him the sword and keep

the scabbard. I propose that we name him fencing-master. It is only on this condition that I consent to let him live. If you indorse my opinion, I will even force myself to offer him my left hand, inasmuch as he has disabled the other."

"Benjamin is right," cried a multitude of voices. "Bravo, Benjamin. Machecourt must be made fencing-master."

And each one ran to his seat, and Benjamin ordered a second dessert.

Meanwhile the news of the accident spread to Clamecy. In passing from mouth to mouth, it grew marvellously, and by the time it reached my grandmother, it had taken on the gigantic proportions of a murder committed by her husband upon the person of her brother.

In the less than five feet of my grandmother's figure there dwelt a character full of firmness and energy. She did not go screaming and crying to her neighbours and have vinegar thrown on her face. With that presence of mind which grief imparts to strong souls, she saw at once what she had to do. She put her children to bed, took all the money there was in the house and the few jewels that she possessed, in order to supply her husband with means to leave the country, if that should be necessary; made up a bundle of linen for bandages and of lint to staunch the wounds of the injured man in case he should still be alive; took a mattress from her bed, and asked a neighbour to follow her with it;

and then, wrapping herself in her cloak, she started without faltering for the fatal tea-garden. On entering the faubourg, she met her husband, whom they were bringing back in triumph, crowned with corks. Benjamin, on whose left arm he was supported, was crying at the top of his voice: "Know all men by these presents, that Monsieur Machecourt, verger to his Majesty, has just been appointed fencing-master, in recognition of——"

"Dog of a drunkard!" cried my grandmother, on seeing Benjamin; and, unable to resist the emotion that had been stifling her for an hour, she fell upon the pavement. They had to carry her home on the mattress which she had intended for her brother.

As for Benjamin, he forgot his wound until the next morning when putting on his coat; but his sister had a high fever. She was dangerously ill for a week, and during the entire time Benjamin did not leave her bedside. When she could listen to him at last, he promised her that henceforth he would lead a more regular life, and said he was seriously thinking of paying his debts and marrying.

My grandmother soon recovered. She charged her husband to be on the lookout for a wife for Benjamin.

Some time after that, one evening in November, my grandfather came home, splashed to his neck, but radiant.

"I have found something far better than we ex-

pected," cried the excellent man, clasping his brother-in-law's hands. "Now, Benjamin, you are rich; you shall be able to eat as many matelotes as you like."

"What have you found?" asked my grandmother and Benjamin at the same time.

"An only daughter, a rich heiress, the daughter of Minxit, with whom we celebrated Saint Yves a month ago."

"What, that village doctor who examines urines?"

"Precisely. He accepts you unconditionally; he is charmed with your wit; he believes you are well fitted, by your manner and your eloquence, to aid him in his profession."

"The devil!" said Benjamin, scratching his head, "I am not anxious to examine urines."

"Oh, you big simpleton! Once you are father Minxit's son-in-law, you can tell him and his vials to go hang, and bring your wife to Clamecy."

"Yes, but Mademoiselle Minxit has red hair."

"She is only blonde, Benjamin, I give you my word of honour."

"She is so freckled one would say a handful of bran had been thrown in her face."

"I saw her this evening. I assure you she has hardly any freckles at all."

"Besides, she is five feet three inches tall. I really am afraid of spoiling the human race. We shall have children as tall as bean-poles."

"Oh, those are only stupid jokes," said my grand-

mother. "I met your tailor yesterday, and he absolutely insists on being paid; and you know very well your barber will not dress your hair any more."

"So you wish me, my dear sister, to marry Mademoiselle Minxit? But you do not know what that means, *Minxit.* And you, Machecourt, do you know?"

"To be sure I know. It means father Minxit."

"Have you read Horace, Machecourt?"

"No, Benjamin."

"Well, Horace says: *Num minxit patrios cineres.* It is that confounded preterit that revolts me. Besides, my dear sister is no longer sick. M. Minxit, Mme. Minxit, M. Rathery Benjamin Minxit, little Jean Rathery Minxit, little Pierre Rathery Minxit, little Adèle Rathery Minxit. Why, in our family there will be enough to turn a mill. And then, to be frank about it, I hardly care to marry. It is true there is a song that says:

> . . . 'What happiness
> Within the bonds of married life!'

But this song does not know what it sings. It must have been written by a bachelor.

> . . . 'What happiness
> Within the bonds of married life!'

That would be all right, Machecourt, if a man were free to choose a companion for himself; but the necessities of social life always force us to marry in

a ridiculous way and contrary to our inclinations. The man marries a dowry, and the woman a profession. Then, after all the fine Sundays of their honeymoon, they return to the solitude of their household, only to see that they do not suit each other. One is stingy and the other extravagant; the wife is coquettish and the husband jealous; one loves like a tempest and the other like a gentle breeze; they would like to be a thousand miles apart, but they have to live in the iron circle within which they have confined themselves, and remain together *usque ad vitam æternam.*"

"Is he drunk?" whispered my grandfather to his wife.

"What makes you think so?" she answered.

"Because he talks sensibly."

However, they made my uncle listen to reason, and it was agreed that on the next day, Sunday, he should go to see Mademoiselle Minxit.

CHAPTER III

HOW MY UNCLE MEETS AN OLD SERGEANT AND A POODLE DOG, WHICH PREVENTS HIM FROM GOING TO M. MINXIT'S

At eight o'clock the next morning, my uncle freshened and dressed, was all ready to start, except that he still needed a pair of shoes that were to be brought to him by Cicero, the famous town-crier of whom we have already spoken, who combined the trade of a shoemaker with that of a drummer.

It was not long before Cicero arrived. In those free and easy days, when a workman brought work to a house, it was the custom not to let him go away without first making him drink several glasses of wine. It was a bad habit, I admit, but those kindly ways softened the distinctions of rank. The poor man was grateful to the rich man for his generosity, and was not envious of him. That is why during the Revolution there were instances of admirable devotion shown by servants to their masters, by farmers to their landlords, by labourers to their employers, certainly not to be found in our day of insolence, arrogance, and ridiculous pride.

Benjamin asked his sister to draw a bottle of white

wine to drink with Cicero. His sister brought one bottle, then two, then three, up to seven bottles.

"My dear sister, I beg of you, one more bottle."

"You wretch, don't you know this is the eighth bottle already?"

"But my dear sister, we keep our accounts separate."

"Remember, you are going on a journey."

"Just this last bottle, and I will start."

"A fine condition to start in! Suppose any one should send for you now to visit a patient?"

"My dear sister, how little you appreciate the good effects of wine! It is easy to see that you never drink anything but the limpid waters of Beuvron. What if I do have to travel, my center of gravity is always in the same place. If I have to bleed some one—— By the way, sister, I ought to bleed you. Machecourt advised it when he left. You complained this morning of a severe headache. A bleeding will do you good."

So saying, Benjamin took out his case of instruments, and my grandmother armed herself with a pair of tongs.

"The devil! You are a very rebellious patient. Very well, let us compromise. I will not bleed you, and you will go get us the eighth bottle of wine."

"I will not bring you a single glass."

"Then I will draw it myself," said Benjamin; and, taking the bottle, he started for the cellar.

Seeing no better way of stopping him, my grand-

Mme. Machecourt

mother seized his queue, but Benjamin paid not the slightest attention to this, and walked to the cellar as steadily as if there had been nothing more than a bunch of onions hanging to his queue. He came back with his bottle filled.

"My dear sister, it was well worth while for the two of us to go to the cellar for a paltry bottle of white wine; but I warn you, if you persist in these bad habits, you will force me to cut off my queue."

A moment ago Benjamin had looked upon the journey to Corvol as a disagreeable duty. Now he insisted upon starting, and my grandmother, to prevent him, locked his shoes up in a closet.

"I tell you, I am going."

"And I tell you, you are not going."

"Would you like me to drag you all the way to M. Minxit's at the end of my queue?"

It was in the midst of this discussion that my grandfather found the brother and sister when he arrived. He put an end to it by announcing that he had to go to La Chapelle the next day and would take Benjamin with him.

Grandfather was up before daylight. When he had scribbled off his writ and noted at the end, "The cost, six francs, four sous and six deniers," he wiped his pen on his coat sleeve, carefully laid his spectacles in their case, and went to wake Benjamin up. Benjamin was sleeping like the Prince de Condé (that is, if the Prince was not shamming sleep) on the eve of a battle.

"Get up, get up, Benjamin. It's broad daylight."

"You're wrong," answered Benjamin, turning towards the wall with a grunt, "it is pitch dark."

"Raise your head, and you will see the sunlight on the floor."

"That's the light from the street lamp."

"Oh, then you don't want to go?"

"No, I dreamt the whole night through of hard bread and sour wine, and if we go, something bad might happen."

"Very well, if you are not up in ten minutes, I will send your dear sister to you. But, if you get up, I will open that quarter-cask of old wine—you know which."

"You're sure it's from Pouilly, aren't you?" said Benjamin, sitting up in bed. "On your word of honour?"

"Yes, on my word of honour as a summons-server."

"Then go open your quarter-cask. But I warn you, if anything happens on the way, it is you who will have to answer for it to my dear sister."

An hour later my uncle and my grandfather were on their way to Moulot. At some distance from the town they met two peasant boys, one of whom was carrying a rabbit under his arm and the other two hens in a basket. The boy with the rabbit said to the other one:

"If you tell M. Cliquet that my rabbit is a war-

ren rabbit and you saw me get it from a trap, I will make you my chum."

"All right, if you tell Madame Deby that my hens lay twice a day and their eggs are as big as ducks' eggs."

"You are two little thieves," said my grandfather. "One of these days I will have your ears pulled by the police officer."

"And I, my friends," said Benjamin, "beg you each to accept this twelve-denier piece."

"Well, that is generosity well placed," said my grandfather, shrugging his shoulders. "No doubt you will bestow the flat of your sword on the first honest poor man you come across if you throw your money away on these two scamps."

"Scamps to you, Machecourt, who see nothing but the outside of things. To me those boys are two philosophers. They have just invented a machine, which, if well organized, would make the fortune of ten honest people."

"And what machine may that be," said my grandfather with an air of incredulity, "which your two philosophers have invented? I'd thrash the philosophers soundly if we had time to stop."

"A simple machine," my uncle replied. "This is how it works. There are ten of us, ten friends, who, instead of meeting for breakfast, meet to make our fortunes."

"At least something worth meeting for," interrupted my grandfather.

"All ten of us are intelligent, skilful, even tricky, if need be. We can assume a lofty tone and are fascinating talkers. We play with words as cleverly as a juggler plays with his balls. As for morality, we are all capable in our professions; and well-meaning persons may say, without seriously compromising themselves, that we are the superiors of our colleagues. In a perfectly honourable spirit we form a society for throwing each other bouquets, puffing each other, and boosting our small deserts."

"I understand," said my grandfather. "One of you sells rat poison and has nothing but a big drum, the other, Swiss tea and has nothing but a pair of cymbals. You pool your means of making a noise, and——"

"Exactly," interrupted Benjamin. "You see, if the machine works properly, each of the members has nine instruments around him that make a tremendous noise.

"There are nine of us who say, 'Page the lawyer drinks too much. But I believe the devil of a fellow steeps the Nivernais code of laws in his wine and then corks up his logic in bottles. He wins every case he wants to. The other day he won large damages for a nobleman because the nobleman had beaten a peasant. The process-server, Parlanta, is a little too cunning. But he is the Hannibal of process-servers. You can't escape his arrests for debt. A debtor would have to be without a body to evade him. He would not hesitate to lay his hands on a duke or a

peer. As for Benjamin Rathery, he is an easy-going fellow who makes fun of everything and laughs a fever in the face. A man, if you will, of the dish and the bottle. But it is for that very reason that I'd rather call him in when I'm ill than anyone else. He hasn't got the manner of those gloomy doctors whose record is a cemetery. He is too gay and his digestion is too good for a man who has many deaths on his conscience. In this way each of the members is multiplied by nine."

"Yes," said my grandfather, "but will that give you nine red coats? Nine times Benjamin Rathery, what does that make?"

"That makes nine hundred times Machecourt," Benjamin retorted like a flash. "But let me finish my explanation. You can make your jokes afterward. Here are nine advertisements that insinuate themselves everywhere, that to-morrow repeat under another form what they have told you to-day; nine placards that talk and catch passers-by by the arm; nine signs that promenade through the town and discuss, and propound dilemmas and set up syllogisms and make sport of you if you are not of their opinion.

"As a result, the reputations of Page and Rapin and Rathery, till then dragging themselves along painfully within the limits of the small town, like a lawyer moving in a vicious circle, suddenly soar upward. Yesterday they had no feet. To-day they have wings. They expand like gas let out of a sealed bottle. They spread throughout the province.

Clients stream to these people from all parts of the bailiwick, from the south and the north and the east and the west, like the elect in the Apocalypse streaming into Jerusalem. At the end of five or six years Benjamin Rathery is the possessor of a large fortune, which he spends in luncheons and dinners to the loud accompaniment of glasses and bottles. You, Machecourt, are no longer a server of writs. I buy you the office of bailiff. Your wife is covered with silk and lace like an image of Our Lady. Your oldest son, who is already a choir-boy, enters the seminary. Your second son who is sickly and as yellow as a Canary bird, studies medicine. I make over to him my good-will and my practise and keep him in red coats. Of your younger son I make a lawyer. Your older daughter marries a literary man and we marry the younger one to a fat bourgeois, and the day after the wedding we put the machine away in the attic."

"Yes, but there is just one little flaw in your machine. Honest people can't use it."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Because the effect is immoral."

"Can you prove your immoral effect by premises and conclusions?"

"Go away with your premises and conclusions. You who are a scholar reason with your intellect. I who am a poor process-server feel with my con-

Rathery and Cicero
at the seventh Bottle and how Rathery
meets the Sergeant

science. I maintain that any man who acquires a fortune in any other way than by his own work and his own talents does not come by it rightly."

"Excellent, Machecourt," cried my uncle, "you are perfectly right. Conscience is the best logician, and charlatanism, in whatever disguise, is a fraud always. So we will break our machine and say no more about it."

Chatting on in this way, they approached the village of Moulot. A man looking something like a soldier was sitting at the gate of a vineyard. He was all framed in by blackberry bushes, which had been browned and reddened by the frost and hung about him like tousled hair. On his head was a piece of a cocked hat without a cockade. His emaciated face had a stony colour like the deep ivory of old monuments long exposed to the sunlight. The two halves of a huge white mustache encircled his mouth like a parenthesis. He was dressed in an old uniform, and across one sleeve was an old, worn-out strip of galloon.

The other sleeve, with the insignia gone, was nothing but a rectangle showing a newer material and a deeper shade than the rest of the garment. His bare legs, swollen by the cold, were as red as beets. He was moistening a piece of black bread with a few drops of brandy from a gourd. A large poodle dog was sitting in front of him, following all his movements with the attentiveness of a deaf mute who listens to his master's orders with his eyes.

My uncle would rather have passed a tavern without going in than have passed this man without stopping to speak to him.

"My good man, that is a bad lunch you have there," he said from the roadside.

"I have eaten many a worse one. But Fontenoy and I have good appetites."

"Who is Fontenoy?"

"My dog. This one here."

"The devil! A fine name for a dog. In fact, if glory is good for kings, why should it not be good for poodles?"

"That is his *nom de guerre,*" continued the sergeant. "His real name is Azor."

"Why do you call him Fontenoy?"

"Because he took an English captain prisoner at the battle of Fontenoy."

"Indeed? How did he do that?" exclaimed my uncle, greatly amazed.

"Very simply—by hanging to one of his coat-tails, until I could put my hand on his shoulder. Just as he is, Fontenoy was given an army order, and had the honour to be presented to Louis XV., who condescended to say to me: 'Sergeant Duranton, that's a fine dog of yours.' "

"A king courteous to animals. I am surprised he did not bestow a title of nobility upon your poodle. How is it you left the service of so good a king?"

"Because they committed an injustice against me,"

said the sergeant, his eyes lighting up and his nostrils dilating with anger. "It's ten years since I've been wearing these gold rags on my arms, and I have been through all the campaigns of Morris of Saxony, and I have more scars on my body than would be required for two periods of service. They promised me the epaulets, but to make a weaver's son an officer would have been a scandal to make every hair of every animal in the kingdom of France and Navarre stand on end in horror. So, over my head, they promoted a chick of a knight just hatched from the page's shell. He will find a way of getting killed. They are brave, there is no denying that; but the man doesn't know how to say Right-dress!"

At this word, uttered very emphatically, the poodle turned his head to the right, military fashion.

"Fine, Fontenoy," said his master, "you forget we have retired from the service." Then he went on: "I could not forgive the very Christian king. I have been on bad terms with him ever since; and I asked him for my dismissal, which he graciously granted."

"You did well, my brave fellow," cried Benjamin, slapping the old soldier on the shoulder, an imprudent demonstration, for the poodle nearly ate him up. "If my approval is of any value to you, I give it to you without reserve. The nobles have never stood in the way of my advancement, but that does not keep me from hating them with my whole heart and soul."

"In that case a purely Platonic hatred," interrupted my grandfather.

"Say rather a purely philosophical hatred, Machecourt. Of all absurd things, nobility is the most absurd. It is a flagrant revolt of despotism against the Creator. Did God make the grasses of the field one higher than the other? Did he engrave escutcheons upon the wings of birds and the hides of beasts? What do these superior men signify whom a king makes by letters-patent as he licenses an exciseman or a huckster? Dating from to-day, you will acknowledge Mr. So-and-so as a superior man. Signed 'Louis XV.,' and lower down, 'Choiseul.' A fine way of establishing superiority. A serf is made a count by Henri IV. because he served his majesty with a nice goose. Had he served a capon along with the goose, he would have been made a marquis, and not a bit more ink or parchment would have been needed. Now the descendants of these men have the privilege of beating us because our ancestors never had the opportunity of offering a fowl's wing to a king. Just see on what a little thing greatness depends in this world! Had the goose been cooked a bit too much or a bit too little, had it been seasoned with one pinch of salt too much or too little, had a speck of soot fallen into the dripping pan or a tiny cinder on the slices of bread, had the bird been served a moment too soon or too late, there would have been one noble family the less in France. And the people bow low to these great

M. Machecourt

ones. Oh, I should like the same that Caligula wanted of the Romans, that France had only a single pair of cheeks to slap."

"But tell me, imbecile people, what value do you find in the two letters that the nobles place in front of their names? Do they add an inch to their height? Have they more iron than you in their blood, more brain matter inside their skulls? Can they handle a heavier sword than yours? Does this marvellous *de* cure scrofula? Does it safeguard its possessor against the colic when he has dined too heavily, or from intoxication when he has drunk too much? Don't you see that all these counts, these barons, these marquises are capital letters which, in spite of the place they occupy in the line, don't help with the spelling any more than the small letters? If a duke and a peer and a woodcutter were alone together on an American prairie or in the middle of Sahara, I should like to know which of them would be the nobler.

"Their great-great-grandfather wielded the shield, and your father made cotton caps. What does that prove for them or against you? Do they come into the world with their ancestor's shield at their side? Have they his scars marked on their skin? What is this greatness that is transmitted from father to son, like a fresh candle lighted at a dying candle? Are the mushrooms that spring up on the decayed wood of a dead oak, oaks? When I hear that the king has created a noble family, it is as though I were to

see a farmer planting in his field a great fool of a poppy that will choke up twenty furrows with its seed and yield nothing but four big red leaves a year. Nevertheless, as long as there are kings, there will be nobles. The kings make counts, marquises, dukes, so that admiration should rise up to them by degrees. Relatively to the kings the nobles are the small show at the entrance which gives the idlers on the street a foretaste of the magnificent spectacle inside. A king without nobility would be a *salon* without an antechamber. But this dainty ministering to their vanity will cost them dear. It is impossible that twenty millions of men should forever consent to be nothing in the state so that a few thousand courtiers may be something. He who sows privileges will reap revolutions.

"The time is not far off perhaps when all those brilliant escutcheons will be dragged in the gutter, and those who now adorn themselves with them will need the protection of their valets."

"What," you say to me, "your uncle Benjamin said all that?"

"Why not?"

"All in one breath?"

"To be sure. What is so surprising about it? My grandfather had a jug that held a pint and a half, and my uncle emptied it at one draught. He called it making tirades."

"And his words? How were they preserved?"

"My grandfather wrote them down."

"You mean to say he had writing material with him there in the open country?"

"How stupid! Wasn't he a process-server?"

"And the sergeant? Did he have anything more to say?"

"Certainly. He had to say something for my uncle to reply to."

So then, the sergeant said:

"I have been tramping now for three months. I go from farm to farm, and I stay as long as they are willing to keep me. I drill with the children, I tell the men the story of our campaigns, and Fontenoy amuses the women with his tricks. I never am in a hurry because I never exactly know where I am going. They send me back to my fireside, and I have no fireside. My father's hearth was destroyed long ago, and my arms are hollower and rustier than two old gun-barrels. However, I think I shall go back to my village. Not that I expect to be better off there than anywhere else. The ground is as hard there as elsewhere, and the roads there don't flow with brandy. But what is the difference? I'll go there anyway. It is a sort of sick man's whim. I shall be the garrison of the neighbourhood. If they won't support the old soldier, they will at least have to bury him, and," he added, "they will certainly be kind enough to place a little soup for Fontenoy on my grave, until he dies of grief. For Fontenoy will not let me go away alone. That's the promise he

makes me when we are alone and he looks at me. My good Fontenoy."

"So that is the fate they have prepared for you?" answered Benjamin. "Truly, kings are the most selfish of beings. If the serpents that our poets speak so ill of had a literature, they would make kings the symbol of ingratitude. I somewhere read that after God made the heart of kings a dog ran off with it, and not wishing to do his work over again, he put a stone in its place. That seems to me very likely. As for the Capets, perhaps they have an onion in place of a heart. I defy anyone to prove the contrary.

"Because these people had a cross made on their foreheads with oil, their persons are august, they are majesties, they are *we* instead of I. They can do no wrong. Should their *valets de chambre* happen to scratch them putting on their shirts, it would be a sacrilege. Their little ones are highnesses, these tots, which a woman carries in her hand, and whose cradle could be put in a hen-coop. They are very high heights, most serene mountains. We would gladly gild their nurses' nipples. If such is the effect of a little oil, how much we ought to respect the anchovies that are pickled in oil till we eat them!

"In the cast of kings and emperors, pride goes to the point of madness. They are compared to Jupiter holding a thunder-bolt, and they do not consider themselves too highly honoured by the comparison.

Leave out the thunder-bolt, and they would be offended. Nevertheless, Jupiter has the gout, and it takes two lackeys to lead him to table or to bed. The rhymester Boileau on his own authority ordered the winds to keep quiet because he was going to speak of Louis XIV.:

'Be silent, O ye winds,
Of Louis I shall speak.'

"And Louis XIV. saw nothing except what was quite natural in this. Only it never occurred to him to bid the commanders of his vessels speak of Louis in order to still the tempests.

"All these poor madmen believe that the extent of earth over which they reign is theirs, and God gave it to Count Odo of Paris, soil and sub-soil, to be enjoyed, without disturbance or hindrance, by him and his descendants. If a courier tells them that God made the Seine for the express purpose of feeding the great fountain of the Tuileries, they will consider him a man of intelligence. They look upon the millions of men around them as their property, the title to which cannot be disputed on the penalty of hanging. Some come into the world to furnish them with money, some to die in their quarrels, and some with the clearest and reddest blood, to beget mistresses for them. All this evidently because an old archbishop, with his trembling hand, made the sign of the cross on their brows.

"They take a man in the heydey of youth, put

a gun in his hands and a knapsack on his back, stick a cockade on his cap and say to him: 'My brother of Prussia has wronged me. You are to attack all his subjects. I have warned them by my process-server, whom I call a herald, that on the first of April next you will have the honour to present yourself at the frontier to cut their throats and they should be ready to welcome you properly. Between monarchs these are considerations that one owes the other. At first sight you may think our enemies are men. I warn you, they are Prussians. You can tell them from human beings by the colour of their uniforms. Try to do your duty well, for I shall be there sitting on my throne watching you. If you bring back victory when you return to France, you will be led beneath the windows of my palace. I will appear in full uniform and say: 'Soldiers, I am satisfied with you.' If you are one hundred thousand men, you will have a hundred-thousandth of these six words for your share. In case you should remain on the battlefield, which may very well happen, I will send your family the death certificate, so that they may mourn you, and that brothers may inherit your property. If you lose an arm or a leg, I will pay you what they are worth, but if you have the good or the ill fortune, whichever you may think it, to escape the bullet, and you no longer have the strength to carry your knapsack, I will dismiss you, and you can go die where you like. I have no further interest in the matter."

"Exactly," said the sergeant. "When they have extracted the phosphorus of which they make their glory from our blood they throw us aside the way the wine-grower throws the grape skin on the muck-heap, after he has pressed out the juice, or the way a child throws the pit of the fruit he has just eaten into the gutter."

"That is very wrong of them," said Machecourt, whose mind was at Corvol, and who was eager to see his brother-in-law.

"Machecourt," said Benjamin, looking at him askance, "choose your expressions better. This is no laughing matter. Really, when I see these valiant soldiers, whose blood has made the glory of their country, obliged to spend the rest of their life in a cobbler's hole of a workshop, like poor old Cicero, while a multitude of gilded puppets snatch up all the taxes, and prostitutes have cashmere for their morning wrappers, a single one of which is worth the entire wardrobe of a poor housewife, I am furious at kings. If I were God, I would make them wear a uniform of lead, and condemn them to a thousand years of military service in the moon, with all their iniquities in their knapsacks. I'd make the emperors be corporals."

On recovering his breath and wiping his brow—for his feelings and his indignation had put my worthy great-uncle into a sweat—he took my grandfather aside and said:

"What do you say to our having this brave man

and his glorious poodle breakfast with us at Manette's?"

"Hem! Ahem!" objected my grandfather.

"The devil!" replied Benjamin. "It isn't every day you meet a poodle who has taken an English captain prisoner; and every day political banquets are given to persons worth less than this honourable beast."

"But have you any money?" said my grandfather. "I have only a thirty-sou piece that your sister gave me this morning because, I believe, it isn't stamped right, and she impressed upon me to bring her back at least half of it."

"I haven't a single sou, but I am Manette's physician, and she from time to time is my landlady, and we give each other credit."

"Nothing more than Manette's physician?"

"What's that to you?"

"Nothing. But I warn you I shan't stay at Manette's more than an hour."

So my uncle extended his invitation to the sergeant. He accepted without ceremony, and joyfully placed himself between my uncle and my grandfather, walking in what soldiers call lock-step.

They met a bull being driven to pasture by a peasant. Irritated, no doubt, by Benjamin's coat, he made a lunge at him. My uncle dodged his horns, and, having joints like springs of steel, he bounded across a broad ditch separating the road from the field with as little effort as if he had been taking a

M. Duranton

dance step. The bull, evidently eager to rip up the red coat, tried to imitate my uncle, but landed in the middle of the ditch. "Good enough for you!" said Benjamin. "That's what you get by seeking a quarrel with people who are not thinking of you." But the beast, as obstinate as a Russian mounting to an assault, was not discouraged. Planting his hoofs in the half-thawed ground, he tried to climb the slope. Thereupon, my uncle drew his sword, and did his best to prick the enemy's snout. He called to the peasant: "My good man, stop your beast; else I shall have to put my sword through his body." But, so saying, he let his sword fall into the ditch. "Take off your coat, and throw it to him as quickly as you can," cried Machecourt. "Hide among the vines," said the peasant. "Sic him! Sic him, Fontenoy!" said the sergeant. The poodle leaped at the bull, and, as if knowing whom he had to deal with, bit him on the ham-string. The bull then turned his wrath against the dog; and, while he was thrusting his horns furiously this way and that, the peasant came up and succeeded in passing a noose around his hind legs. This skilful manœuver met with complete success and put an end to the hostilities.

Benjamin returned to the road. He thought Machecourt was going to laugh at him, but Machecourt was as pale as a sheet and his legs were trembling.

"Come, Machecourt, brace up," said my uncle, "else I shall have to bleed you. As for you, my

brave Fontenoy, you made a prettier fable to-day than the one by La Fontaine entitled 'The Dove and the Ant.' You see, gentlemen, a good deed is never lost. Generally the giver is obliged to allow long credit to the debtor. But Fontenoy has paid me in advance. Who the devil would have thought I should ever be under obligations to a poodle?"

Moulot is hidden among a clump of willows and poplars on the left bank of the Beuvron stream, at the foot of a big hill, into which the road to La Chapelle cuts. A few houses of the village had already gone up by the side of the road, as white and as spick and span as peasant women dressed for the fairs. Among them was Manette's wine-shop. At sight of the frost-covered sign hanging from the attic-window, Benjamin began to sing in his stentorian voice:

> "Friends, here we must come to a halt,
> I see the shadow of a dram-shop."

On hearing this familiar voice, Manette ran to the doorway, blushing.

Manette was really a very pretty person, plump, chubby-cheeked and fair, but perhaps a little too pink. Her cheeks were like a pool of milk with a few drops of wine floating on the surface.

"Gentlemen," said Benjamin, "permit me first of all to kiss our pretty hostess as part payment in advance for the good lunch she is going to give us soon."

"Oh, come, Monsieur Rathery!" exclaimed Manette, retreating. "You are not made for peasant women. Go and kiss Mademoiselle Minxit."

"It seems rumours of my marriage have already spread through the country," my uncle thought. "No one but M. Minxit can have spoken of it. Hence he must be anxious to have me for a son-in-law. So, if he should not receive my visit to-day, that would not be a reason for breaking off the negotiations."

"Manette," he said, "Mademoiselle Minxit is not in question here. Have you any fish?"

"Fish?" said Manette. "There are plenty in M. Minxit's pond."

"Manette, I ask you again," said Benjamin, "have you any fish? Be careful what answer you give me."

"Well," said Manette, "my husband has gone fishing, and he will soon return."

"Soon does not interest us. Put as many slices of ham on the gridiron as it will hold, and make us an omelette of all the eggs in your hen-house."

The lunch was soon ready. While the omelette was leaping in the frying-pan, the ham was broiling on the iron. Scarcely was the omelette served than it was already consumed. It takes a hen six months to lay twelve eggs, a woman a quarter of an hour to convert the twelve eggs into an omelette, and three men five minutes to devour the omelette. "See," said Benjamin, "how much faster tearing down goes on than building up. Land where there is a large population grows poorer every day.

Man is a greedy child who wears his nurse away. The ox does not restore to the fields all the grass he takes from it. The ashes of the oak that we burn do not return to the forest as an oak. The breezes do not carry back to the rose-bush the leaves of the bouquet that the maiden scatters around her. The candle burning in front of us does not fall back on the ground in waxen dew. Rivers continually rob the continents of soil and deposit it in the bosom of the sea. Most of the mountains have no verdure left on their big bald skulls. The Alps expose their bare, jagged bones. The interior of Africa is nothing but a sea of sand. Spain is a vast steppe, and Italy a great charnel-house with only a bed of ashes remaining. Wherever great peoples have passed, they have left sterility in their tracks. This earth, adorned with leaves and flowers, is a consumptive with red cheeks whose days are numbered. A time will come when it will be nothing but an inert, dead, icy mass, a great tombstone on which God will write: 'Here lies the human race.' Meanwhile, gentlemen, let us enjoy the blessings the earth gives us, and, as she is a tolerably good mother, let us drink to her long life."

Next came the ham. My grandfather ate from a sense of duty, because a man must eat to be strong, and must have blood to be able to serve writs. Benjamin ate for amusement. But the sergeant ate like a man who sits down to table for no other purpose, and he did not utter a word.

At table Benjamin was a great man; but his noble stomach was not free from jealousy, that base passion which dims the most brilliant qualities.

He watched the sergeant with the thwarted air of a man who has been excelled, as Cæsar might have looked on from the Capitol at Bonaparte winning the battle of Marengo. After contemplating his man for some time in silence, he thought fit to address these words to him:

"Drinking and eating are two beings that resemble each other. At first sight you would take them for first cousins. But drinking is as much above eating as the eagle who alights upon the mountain peak is above the crow who perches on the tree-top. Eating is a necessity of the stomach; drinking is a necessity of the soul. Eating is only a common workman; drinking is an artist. Drinking inspires poets with jolly ideas, philosophers with noble thoughts, musicians with melodious airs. Eating gives them nothing but cramps. Now, sergeant, I flatter myself I know how to drink as well as you—even better, I believe. But, when it comes to eating, I am a bungler next to you. You could cope with Arthus in person. I even think that on a turkey you could go him a wing better."

"That's because I eat for yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow."

"Then permit me to serve you with this last slice of ham for day after-to-morrow."

"Thank you very much," said the sergeant, "there is an end to everything."

"Well, the Creator who has caused soldiers to pass suddenly from extreme abundance to extreme want has given to them, as he has to the camel, two stomachs. Their second stomach is their knapsack. Put this ham in your knapsack. Neither Machecourt nor I want it."

"No," said the soldier, "I don't have to lay up provisions. I always get food enough. But permit me to offer this ham to Fontenoy. We are in the habit of sharing everything, feast days as well as fast days."

"Your dog really does deserve to be well taken care of," said my uncle. "Will you sell him to me?"

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the sergeant, quickly putting his hand on his poodle.

"I beg pardon, my brave man, I beg pardon. Sorry to have offended you. I was only joking. I know asking a poor man to sell his dog is like proposing to a mother to sell her child."

"You will never make me believe," said my grandfather, "that one can love a dog as much as a child. I once had a poodle, too, a match to yours, sergeant —without offense to Fontenoy—except that the only thing that he ever took prisoner was the tax-collector's wig. Well, one day, when lawyer Page was dining with me, he ran off with a calf's head, and that very night I passed him under the mill-wheel."

"What you say proves nothing. You have a wife

and six children—quite enough of a task for you to love them all without forming a romantic affection for a poodle. But I am talking of a poor devil alone among men and with no relative but his dog. Put a man with a dog on a desert island and a woman with her child on another desert island, and I will wager that in six months the man will love the dog if the dog is at all lovable, as well as the woman will love her child."

"I can conceive," answered my grandfather, "that a traveler would take a dog along for company, or an old woman alone in her room would keep a pug to talk to all day. But that a man should love a dog with real affection, that he should love him as a Christian, I deny. It's impossible."

"And I tell you that under certain circumstances you would love even a rattlesnake. The loving fiber in man cannot remain inactive. The human soul abhors a vacuum. Study the most hardened egoist carefully, and you will find an affection tucked away in a fold of his soul, like a little flower among the stones.

"It is a general rule, and without exception, that man must love something. The dragoon who has no mistress loves his horse. The young girl who has no lover loves her bird. The prisoner, who cannot in decency love his jailer, loves the spider that spins its web in the window of his cell, or the fly that comes down to him in a ray of sunlight. When we find nothing animate to expend our affections upon, we

love mere matter, a ring, a snuff-box, a tree, a flower. The Dutchman has a passion for his tulips, and the antiquary for his cameos."

Just then Manette's husband came in with a fat eel in his basket.

"Machecourt," said Benjamin, "it is noon, that is, dinner-time. What do you say to our making a dinner of this eel?"

"It is time to go," said Machecourt, "and we are going to dine at M. Minxit's."

"And you, sergeant? What do you say to our eating this eel?"

"For my part," said the sergeant, "I am in no hurry. As I am not going anywhere in particular, I arrive at my destination every night."

"Very well said! And the respectable poodle, what is his opinion on the subject?"

The poodle looked at Benjamin and wagged his tail two or three times.

"Good. Silence gives consent. So, Machecourt, there are three of us against your one. You must yield to the will of the majority. You see, my friend, the majority is stronger than all the world. Put ten philosophers on one side and eleven fools on the other, and the fools will carry the day."

"The eel is indeed a very fine one," said my grandfather, "and, if Manette has a little fresh lard, she can make an excellent dish of it. But, the devil! what about my writ? I must perform my office."

"Look here," said Benjamin. "It will undoubtedly

be necessary for some one to lend me his arm to escort me back to Clamecy. If you shirk this pious duty, I will disown you as my brother-in-law."

Since Machecourt set store on being Benjamin's brother-in-law, he remained.

When the eel was ready, they sat down at table again. Manette's dish was a masterpiece. The sergeant could not admire it enough. But a cook's masterpieces are ephemeral. We scarcely give them time to cool. There is only one thing in the arts that can be compared to culinary products—the products of journalism. But even a stew can be warmed over, a *paté de foie gras* may last a whole month, a ham may see its admirers gather about it many times. But a newspaper article has no to-morrow. Before we reach the end, we have forgotten the beginning, and when we have glanced through it, we throw it on our desk, as we throw our napkin on the table after dinner is over. I cannot understand how a man of literary ability can consent to waste his talents in obscure journalistic work; how a man who might write on parchment can make up his mind to scribble on the blotting-paper of a journal. Certainly it must give him no slight pang to see the leaves upon which he has placed his thought fall noiselessly with those thousand other leaves which the immense tree of the press shakes from its branches daily.

While my uncle was philosophising, the hand of the cuckoo clock kept moving on and on. Benjamin did not notice it was dark until Manette put a lighted

candle on the table. Then, without waiting for the observations of Machecourt, who for that matter was scarcely in a condition to observe anything, he declared they had had enough for one day, and it was time to return to Clamecy.

The sergeant and my grandfather went out first. Manette stopped my uncle at the threshold.

"Monsieur Rathery," said she, "see here."

"What is this scrawl?" said my uncle. " 'August 10, three bottles of wine with a cream cheese; September 1, nine bottles and fish with M. Page.' God forgive me, I believe it is a bill."

"To be sure," said Manette. "I see it is time to balance our accounts, and I hope you will send me your bill soon."

"I, Manette, I have no bill against you. Faith! Rather a hard task to touch the round white arm of a pretty woman like you."

"You're making fun of me, Monsieur Rathery," said Manette, thrilling with delight.

"I say it because it is true, because I think it. As for your bill, my poor Manette, it comes at a bad time. I confess I haven't a penny just now. But here is my watch. Keep it until I have paid you. This is quite—convenient. It hasn't been going since yesterday."

Manette began to cry, and tore her bill to bits.

My uncle kissed her on her cheek, her forehead, her eyes, wherever he could find a place to kiss.

"Benjamin," Manette whispered in his ear, lean-

ing toward him, "if you need money, tell me."

"No, no, Manette," my uncle answered quickly, "I don't need your money. The devil! That would be a pretty state of things—to make you pay for the happiness you give me! Why, that would be an indignity. I should be as vile as a prostitute!" And he covered Manette with kisses again.

"Oho! Don't feel embarrassed, Monsieur Rathery," said Jean-Pierre, entering.

"What, you've been here, Jean-Pierre? You're not jealous, are you? I warn you, I have a profound aversion for jealous people."

"I think I have a good right to be jealous."

"Imbecile! You always see things contrary. These gentlemen have charged me to show your wife their satisfaction at the excellent meal she gave us, and I was fulfilling the commission."

"It seems to me you have one good way of showing your satisfaction, and that is by paying your bill. Do you understand?"

"In the first place, Jean-Pierre, we have nothing to do with you. Manette is mistress here. As for paying you, rest easy. That's my affair. You know no one ever loses anything by me. Besides, if you are afraid of waiting too long, I will run my sword through your body this instant. Does that suit you, Jean-Pierre?"

Here my Uncle Benjamin went out.

Up to this time he had only been over-excited. All the elements of intoxication were in him without

his yet being drunk. But outside the wine-shop, the cold clutched at his brain and his legs.

"Hello, there, Machecourt, where are you?"

"Here I am, holding on to your coat."

"You holding on to me? That's good. You honour me, you flatter me. By that you mean to say that I am in a condition to support upright both my personality and yours. At another time, yes. But now I am as weak as any man who has dined too long. I have engaged your arm beforehand. I order you to offer it to me."

"At another time, yes," said Machecourt. "But there's a hitch; I cannot walk either."

"Then you have acted dishonourably. You have failed in the most sacred of duties. I reserved your arm. You were to save yourself for both of us. But I forgive you your weakness. *Homo sum.* That is to say, I forgive you on one condition: that you go right away and get the town constable and two peasants with torches to escort me back to Clamecy. You can take one of the constable's arms, and I will take the other."

"But the constable has only one arm," said my grandfather.

"Then the sound arm belongs to me. The only thing I can do for you is to allow you to hang on to my queue. Only take care not to untie the ribbon. Or, if you prefer, ride on the poodle's back."

"Gentlemen," said the sergeant, "why go to a distance to look for what is close at hand? I have

two sound arms, that the bullets have fortunately spared. I place them at your service."

"You are a brave man, sergeant," said my uncle, taking the old soldier's right arm.

"An excellent man," said my grandfather, taking his left arm.

"I will look out for your future, sergeant."

"And I, too, sergeant, I take upon myself the same task, although, to tell the truth, any task at the present moment——"

"I will teach you how to pull teeth, sergeant."

"And I will teach your poodle to be a bailiff's assistant."

"In three months you will be able to do tricks at the fairs."

"In three months your poodle, if he behaves himself, will be able to earn thirty sous a day."

"The sergeant can begin by practising on you, Machecourt. You have some decayed old stumps that bother you. We will pull one out every other day so as not to wear you out, and when we have finished with the stumps, we will pull out your gums."

"And I will put my bailiff's assistant at the service of your creditors, Monsieur Debtor, and I may as well tell you in advance what your duties toward him will be. In the morning you must give him bread and cheese, or a bunch of little radishes in season. For dinner, soup and boiled beef, and for supper a roast and a salad, or a glass of wine instead of the salad.

You will have to take care that he does not pine away, for nothing does so much honour to a debtor as a good fat keeper. He, for his part, must behave properly toward you. He has no right to disturb you in your occupations, like playing the clarinet, or sounding the hunting horn."

"For the time being I offer the sergeant shelter at home. You do not disapprove, do you, Machecourt?"

"Not exactly, but I very much fear me your dear sister will disown you."

"Ah, gentlemen," said the sergeant, "let us understand each other. Do not expose me to insult. One or the other of you will have to answer for it."

"Rest easy, sergeant," said my uncle. "If anyone should offer you insult, turn to me. Machecourt doesn't know how to fight, except when his adversary gives him the sword and keeps the scabbard."

Thus philosophising, they reached the house. My grandfather was not anxious to enter first, and my uncle preferred to enter second.

To settle the matter, they entered together, knocking against each other like two gourds carried at the end of a stick.

The sergeant and the poodle, whose intrusion made the cat growl like a Bengal tigress, brought up the rear.

"My dear sister," said Benjamin, "I have the honour to present to you a pupil in surgery and a——"

"Benjamin is talking nonsense," interrupted my grandfather. "Don't listen to him. Monsieur is a soldier whom we have been ordered to give a lodging to. We met him outside the door."

My grandmother was a good woman, but something of a shrew. She thought it added to her importance to talk very loud. She wanted badly to get angry, and all the more so because she had a perfect right to. But she prided herself on her good breeding, as the descendant of a lawyer, and the presence of a stranger restrained her.

She offered the sergeant some supper. He declined and for good reason, and she told one of her children to take him to the tavern nearby, and order breakfast to be given him in the morning before he left.

When my grandfather, good, peaceable man that he was, saw a conjugal tempest brewing, he always bent like a reed; which weakness was excusable in a degree, since he was always in the wrong.

He had seen the clouds gathering on his wife's knitted brow, and the sergeant had hardly crossed the threshold, when he, at his bed, scrambled into it as best he could. As for Benjamin, he was incapable of such cowardice. A sermon in five points, like a game of *écarté,* would not have sent him to bed a minute before his time. He was willing to let his sister scold him, but he was not willing to fear her. He awaited the tempest that was about to burst with the indifference of a rock, his hands in his pockets

and his back resting against the mantel-piece, while he hummed:

"Marlbrough has gone to war,
Diddledee, diddledee-dum.
Marlbrough has gone to war.
Who knows if back he'll come?"

My grandmother conducted the sergeant to the door, then, impatient for the fray, she turned and confronted Benjamin.

"Well, Benjamin, are you satisfied with your day's work? You're feeling good, aren't you? Shall I draw a bottle of white wine for you?"

"Thank you, dear sister. As you have so elegantly said, my day's work is done."

"A fine day's work, indeed! It would take many like it to pay your debts. Have you sense enough left at least to tell me how M. Minxit received you?"

"Diddledee, diddlee-dum, dear sister," said Benjamin.

"Ah! Diddledee, diddlee-dum," cried my grandmother. "You wait! I'll diddlee-dum you."

She seized the tongs and my uncle took three steps backward and drew his sword.

"Dear sister," said he, putting himself on guard, "I shall hold you responsible for all the blood that is about to be shed here."

But my grandmother, though descended from a lawyer, had no fear of a sword. She dealt her

brother a blow with the tongs that struck him on the thumb and made him drop his sword.

Benjamin danced about the room, squeezing his wounded thumb in his left hand. My grandfather, although the kindest of men, was suffocating with laughter under the bed-clothes. He could not help saying to my uncle:

"Well, how did you like that thrust? This time you had both the scabbard and the sword. You cannot say the weapons were not equal."

"Alas, no, Machecourt, they were not equal. I ought to have had the shovel. All the same, your wife—I can no longer say dear sister—deserves to wear a pair of tongs at her side instead of a distaff. With a pair of tongs she would win battles. I am conquered, I confess, and I must submit to the law of the conqueror. Well, no, we did not go to Corvol. We stopped at Manette's."

"Always at Manette's, a married woman! Aren't you ashamed of such conduct, Benjamin?"

"Ashamed! Why, dear sister? When a landlady gets married, mayn't one eat at her place any more? That's not the way I look at it. To a true philosopher an inn has no sex. Isn't that so, Machecourt?"

"When I meet her at market, your Manette, I will treat her, shameless creature that she is, as she deserves."

"Dear sister, when you meet Manette at market, buy as many cream cheeses as you like from her, but if you insult her——"

"Well, if I insult her, what will you do?"

"I will leave you, I will go away to the islands and take Machecourt with me, I warn you."

My grandmother realised that her transports of anger would end in nothing, and forthwith made up her mind to a certain course of action.

"Now do what that drunkard over there in bed did," said she. "You need to lie down as much as he. But to-morrow I myself will take you to M. Minxit's, and we shall see if you will stop on the way."

"Diddledee, diddledee-dum," hummed Benjamin, going off to bed.

The idea of the step he was to take the next day disturbed my uncle's slumbers, usually so peaceful and profound. He dreamed aloud, and this is what he said:

"You say, sergeant, that you dined like a king. That's not the word. You put it too weakly. You have dined better than an emperor. Kings and emperors, for all their power, are unequal to anything extra, and you had something extra. You see, sergeant, everything is relative. That dish of fish was certainly not worth a truffled partridge. Nevertheless, it tickled the nerves of your palate more agreeably than a truffled partridge would tickle the king's. Why? Because his majesty's palate is *blasé* in the matter of truffles, whereas yours is not accustomed to fish.

"My dear sister says to me, 'Benjamin, do some-

thing to get rich. Benjamin, marry Mademoiselle Minxit so as to have a fine dowry.' What good would that do me? Does the butterfly take the trouble to build a nest for the sake of the two or three months of fine days that are the span of its life? I am convinced that enjoyments are relative to position, and that at the end of the year the beggar and the rich man have had the same sum of happiness.

"Each individual becomes accustomed to his situation, good or bad. The cripple no longer notices that he walks with a crutch, or the rich man that he rides in a carriage. The wretched snail that carries his house on his back enjoys his day of perfume and sunshine as much as the bird chirping overhead on the branch. The thing to be considered is not the cause, but the effect that the cause produces. Does not the day labourer resting on his bench in front of his cottage feel as good as the king on the eider-down cushions of his armchair? Does not cabbage soup taste as good to the peasant as crab chowder to the king? And does not the beggar sleep as well in the straw as the fine lady behind silk curtains and under perfumed coverlets? The child who finds a sou is happier than the banker who finds a louis, and the peasant who inherits an acre of land is as triumphant as the king whose armies conquer a province and who has his people offer up a *Te Deum.*

"Every evil here below is balanced by a good, and every good that parades itself is weakened by an

invisible evil. God has a thousand ways of making compensations. If he gives one man good dinners, he gives another man a somewhat better appetite, and that restores the equilibrium. He gives the rich man the fear of losses and the worry over preserving his property. To the beggar he gives freedom from care. In sending us into this place of exile he has put upon us all an almost equal burden of misery and well-being. Any other arrangement would have been unjust, for all men are his children.

"And why, as a matter of fact, should the rich man be happier than the poor man? He doesn't work. Very well. But there he misses the pleasure of resting from work.

"He has fine clothes. But the enjoyment from them is with those who look at him. When the church-warden dresses up a saint, does he do it for the saint or for the saint's worshippers? And isn't a hump-back as much of a hump-back under a velvet gown as under jean overalls?

"The rich man has two, three, four, ten servants. My God! Why so proudly add this quantity of useless members to one's body, when the four attached to it perform all its functions? The man accustomed to service is a miserable cripple, who has to be fed.

"The rich man has a house in the city and a villa in the country. But of what use is the villa when the owner is in the house, or the house when he is in the villa? Of what use are the twenty rooms of his

dwellings, when he can occupy only one room at a time?

"His villa is set in a large park, surrounded by a stone wall ten feet high, where he can go walking and dream. But suppose he has no dreams? And, besides, isn't the open country, with only the horizon to wall it in and belonging to everybody, as beautiful as his grand park?

"The sickly, greenish thread of an artificial stream drags itself through the park, with broad water-lily leaves sticking to it like cakes of plaster. Isn't the river that flows through the open country cleaner, hasn't it more of a current than the park stream?

"Dahlias of one hundred and fifty varieties line the rich man's walks. All right. I'll add four to the hundred; which makes one hundred and fifty-six varieties. But is not the elm-shaded road that winds like a snake through the grassy fields as good as his walks? And the hedges festooned with wild roses and sprinkled with hawthorn, the hedges with their bright foliage waving in the wind, scattering flowers by the wayside—aren't they quite the equal of those dahlias which no one can appreciate except the horticulturist?

"The park belongs to the rich man exclusively, you say. You are mistaken. It is only the purchase deed locked up in his secretary that he owns exclusively, and that only in case the worms don't eat it.

"His park belongs to him much less than it does to the birds that build their nests there, or to the rabbits that browse amid the wild thyme, or the insects that rustle in the leaves.

"Can his forester keep the snake from coiling in the grass, or the toad from nestling on the moss?

"The rich man gives festivities. But are not the dances under the old lindens of the promenade to the sound of the bag-pipe also festivities?

"The rich man has a carriage. He has a carriage, the unfortunate! Why, is he a cripple? There is a woman carrying one child in her arms, while another gambols about her, chasing after the butterflies and picking flowers. Which of the two worms is better off? A carriage! But a carriage is an infirmity. Let a wheel break, or a horse cast a shoe, and there you are a cripple. Those grandees who, in the time of Louis XIV., had themselves carried to the ball-room on a litter, poor people who had legs to dance with and none to walk with—how much they must have suffered from the fatigue of those who carried them!

"You think riding in a carriage is enjoyment to the rich man. Not a bit. It's only a sort of slavery that his vanity imposes upon him. If it weren't, why should this gentleman and this lady, who are as thin as a bundle of thorns and whom a donkey could carry with the greatest ease, harness four horses to their coach?

"For my part, when I am on the sward ankle-

deep in moss, or wandering along with my hands in my pockets, dreaming, the blue smoke from my blackened pipe trailing behind me like a shade from the underworld; or when, in the exquisite moonlight, I stride along the white road, shadowed by the hedges, I should like to see anyone dare to offer me a carriage."

Here my uncle awoke.

"What," you say, "your uncle dreamed all that? And out loud?"

Why, what's so surprising in that? Did not Madam George Sand have the reverend father Spiridion dream a whole chapter of one of her novels out loud? And didn't M. Golbéry dream aloud for a whole hour in the Chamber about a proposition on the report of the parliamentary debates? And we ourselves, have we not been dreaming for the last thirteen years that we made a revolution? When my uncle had no time during the day to philosophise, he made up by philosophising in his dreams. That is how I explain the phenomenon I have just told you about.

CHAPTER IV

HOW MY UNCLE PASSED HIMSELF OFF FOR THE WANDERING JEW

MEANWHILE my grandmother put on her dove-coloured silk dress, which she took from her drawer only on solemn and festive occasions. She tied her round cap on with the finest of her ribbons, cerise-coloured and as broad as one's hand and broader. She got ready her cloak of black taffeta trimmed with black lace and took her new lynx muff out of its box, a present from Benjamin on her birthday. He still owed for it. When finished dressing up, she ordered one of her children to go hire M. Durand's donkey, a fine little animal, which had cost three pistoles, at the last fair at Billy, and was let for thirty-six deniers more than ordinary donkeys.

Then she called Benjamin. When he came down, M. Durand's donkey was fastened before the door eating his provender of bran out of a basket set on a chair. A large, pure white pillow was laid between the two baskets slung across his back.

Benjamin first inquired anxiously whether Machecourt was there to drink a glass of white wine with him. His sister told him he had gone out.

"Then I hope, my good sister, that you will be friendly enough to take a little glass of cordial with me." For my uncle's stomach knew how to accommodate itself to all stomachs.

My grandmother did not dislike cordial, on the contrary, she was very fond of it. So she accepted Benjamin's invitation, and permitted him to get the decanter. Then after admonishing my father, who was the oldest child, not to beat his brothers, and telling Premoins, who was ill, to ask for anything he needed, and assigning to Surgie a piece of knitting to be done, my grandmother mounted the donkey.

Long live the earth and the sun! The neighbours gathered in their doorways to witness her departure; for in those days a middle class woman dressed up on a week-day was an event, and everyone who saw it tried to guess the reason therefor and built up a whole system of speculation on it.

Benjamin, clean-shaven and superabundantly powdered and red as a poppy spreading its petals in the morning sun after a stormy night, followed behind, uttering from time to time a vigourous "Gee-hup" in a chest C, and pricking the donkey with the point of his rapier.

M. Durand's donkey, under my uncle's sword pricks, went at a good pace, too good, in fact, to suit my grandmother, who bobbed up and down on her pillow like a shuttlecock on a battledore. But at some distance from the point where the road to Moulot separates from the road to La Chapelle to

reach its modest destination, she perceived that the donkey had slowed down, like a stream of molten metal which thickens and moves slower the farther it gets from the furnace. Its bell, which had been jingling emphatically and proudly, now gave forth only spasmodic sighs, like a voice dying away. My grandmother turned around to ask Benjamin what was the matter, but he had disappeared, melted like a ball of wax, conjured away, lost like a fly in space. No one could give her any information about him. You can imagine her vexation at his sudden disappearance. He was not worth the trouble they took for his happiness, she said to herself. His indifference was incurable. He would always stagnate like a marsh whose waters could not be made to flow in a channel. For a moment she felt a desire to abandon him to his destiny and not even iron his shirts any more. But her queenly character asserted itself. She had begun, and she must finish. She swore she would find Benjamin again and take him to M. Minxit's, even if he had to be tied to her donkey's tail. It is such firmness of resolution that carries great enterprises to their conclusion.

A peasant boy, who was watching his sheep at the fork of the two roads, told her the man in red she was missing had gone down toward the village nearly a quarter of an hour before. My grandmother turned the donkey in that direction, and such was the influence of her indignation upon the beast that he

began to trot of himself, out of pure deference to his rider, as if he desired to do homage to her grand character.

The village of Moulot was in a state of unwonted commotion. The Moulotats, usually so staid and with no more fermentation in their brains than in a cream cheese, seemed all to be in great excitement. The peasants were hurrying down from the hill-sides round about. The women and children came running, calling to each other. Every spinning-wheel was abandoned, every distaff came to a standstill. My grandmother inquired the cause of the commotion. They told her the Wandering Jew had just arrived at Moulot and was lunching in the market-place. She realised instantly that the pretended Wandering Jew was none other than Benjamin; and, indeed, from her donkey's back she soon caught sight of him in the middle of a circle of idle by-standers.

The gable of his three-cornered hat rose above this moving ribbon of black and white heads majestically, as the slate-coloured church steeple rises above the thatched roofs of a village. They had set a small table for him in the market-place itself, and served him with a pint flask of wine and a little loaf of bread. He walked up and down before the table with the gravity of a sacrificiant, now taking a swallow of white wine, now breaking a bit from the loaf.

My grandmother urged her donkey into the crowd and soon found herself in the front row.

"What are you doing here, you wretch?" said she to my uncle, shaking her fist at him.

"You see, Madame, I wander. I am Ahasuerus, commonly called the Wandering Jew. In the course of my travels I have heard much said of the beauty of this little village and the cordiality of its inhabitants, so I resolved to lunch here." Then, approaching her, he said in a low voice: "In five minutes I will follow you, but not a word more, I beg of you. The harm might be irreparable. These imbeciles would be capable of killing me, if they were to discover that I am making fun of them."

The praise of Moulot that Benjamin had succeeded in interjecting into his reply to his sister repaired, or rather prevented, the defeat that her imprudent words would otherwise have caused him, and a thrill of pride ran through the assembly.

"Monsieur Wandering Jew," said a peasant in whose mind still lingered some doubt, "who is that lady who just now shook her fist at you?"

"My good friend," answered my uncle, by no means disconcerted, "she is the Holy Virgin. God ordered me to escort her on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on that little ass. She is really a good woman, but a little talkative. She is in a temper this morning because she has lost her rosary."

"Why isn't the infant Jesus with her?"

"God did not wish her to take him along, because he has chicken-pox just now."

Then the objections began to rain down on Ben-

Rathery treacherously abandons his Sister and is found by her as the Wandering Jew

jamin as thick as hail. But he was not a man to be intimidated by the Moulot blockheads. Danger electrified him, and he parried all the thrusts aimed at him with admirable dexterity; which did not prevent him from every now and then moistening his throat with a swallow of white wine. And, to tell the truth, he was already at his seventh pint.

The village schoolmaster, in the capacity of learned man, was the first to enter the lists.

"Then how does it happen, Monsieur Wandering Jew, that you have no beard? In the Ballad of Brussels it says that you have a thick beard, and you are represented everywhere with a long white beard reaching to your girdle."

"It was too dirty, Monsieur schoolmaster. I asked the good God to let me go without that horrid big beard, and he put it in my queue instead."

"But how do you manage to shave, since you cannot stop?" the teacher insisted.

"God has provided for that, my dear Monsieur schoolmaster. Every morning he sends me the patron saint of the barbers in the shape of a butterfly, who shaves me with the edge of his wing, while hovering around me."

"But, Monsieur Jew," the schoolmaster continued, "the good God has been very stingy with you in giving you only five sous at a time."

"My friend," rejoined my uncle, crossing his arms over his breast and bowing profoundly, "let us bless

the decrees of God. Probably that is all the money he had in his pocket."

"I should very much like to know," said the old tailor of the place, "how they succeeded in taking the measure for your coat, which fits you like a glove, since you are never at rest?"

"You, who are of the trade, you should have noticed that this coat was not made by the hand of man. Twice a year one grows on my back, on the first of April, a light one of red serge, and on All Saints' Day a heavy one of red velvet."

"Then," put in a fair-haired youngster with a roguish face, "you must wear your coats out very fast. All Saints' Day isn't two weeks past, and your coat is threadbare already and white along the seams."

Unfortunately for the little philosopher his father was standing beside him. "Go back to the house and see if I'm there," he said, giving him a kick on his buttocks and begging my uncle to excuse the impertinence of this little fellow, whose schoolmaster neglected to teach him religion properly.

"Gentlemen," cried the schoolmaster, "I call you all to witness, and Monsieur Wandering Jew also, that Nicholas has libelled me. He continually assails the village authorities. I am going to pull his tongue."

"Yes," said Nicholas, "there's a fine authority for you. Bring charges against me as much as you like. I shall not find it hard to prove that what I say is

true. Just let the judge question my boy Charlie. The other day I asked him which one of Jacob's sons was the most remarkable, and he answered Pharaoh. Mother Pintot is my witness."

"Oh, gentlemen," said my uncle, "do not quarrel on my account. I should be grieved if my arrival in this beautiful village were to be the occasion of a lawsuit. The wool has not yet fully grown on my coat, as it is only St. Martin's Day now. That is what led little Charlie into error. Monsieur schoolmaster was unaware of this circumstance, and consequently could not teach it to his pupils. I hope M. Nicholas is satisfied with this explanation."

CHAPTER V

MY UNCLE WORKS A MIRACLE

My uncle was about to break up the meeting, when he noticed a pretty peasant girl trying to make her way through the crowd. As he loved young girls at least as well as Jesus Christ loved little children, he signalled to the bystanders to allow her to approach.

"I should very much like to know," said the young Moulotate with her finest courtesy, the courtesy she made to the bailiff when she met him on the way as she was carrying cream to him, "I should like to know whether what old Gothon says is really true. She says you work miracles."

"Undoubtedly," answered my uncle, "when they are not too difficult."

"Then could you cure my father by a miracle? Since this morning he has been sick with a disease that nobody knows about."

"Why not?" said my uncle. "But first of all, my pretty child, you must permit me to kiss you. Otherwise the miracle won't work."

And he kissed the young Moulotate on both cheeks, damned sinner that he was.

"See here," a voice from the rear exclaimed, a

voice he knew well, "does the Wandering Jew kiss women?"

He turned and saw Manette.

"Undoubtedly, my beautiful lady. God permits me to kiss three a year. This is the second one I have kissed this year, and, if you will allow me, you shall be the third."

The idea of working a miracle fired Benjamin's ambition. To pass himself off for the Wandering Jew, even at Moulot, was much, was immense, was enough to make all the bright wits of Clamecy jealous. He took rank immediately among the famous mystifiers, and lawyer Page wouldn't dare to speak to him again of his hare changed into a rabbit. Who would dare to compare himself in audacity and resources of imagination with Benjamin Rathery when once he had worked a miracle? And who knows? Perhaps future generations would take the thing seriously. If he were to be canonized, if they were to make a big saint of red wood in his image, read a mass in his honour, give him a niche, a place in the almanac, an *Ora pro nobis* in the litanies, if he should become the patron saint of a good parish, if they were to celebrate his birthday every year with incense, crown him with flowers, decorate him with ribbons, place a ripe grape in his hands, enshrine his red coat in a reliquary, and give him a church-warden to wash his face every week. If he should work cures of the plague or hydrophobia! But everything depended upon his carrying this miracle out suc-

cessfully. If only he had seen a few miracles performed! But how was he to go about it? And if he failed, he would be scoffed at, jeered, vilified, possibly beaten. He would lose all the glory of the hoax so well begun. "Ah, bah!" said my uncle, pouring a large glass of wine to inspire him. "Providence will provide. *Audaces fortuna juvat.* Besides, a miracle asked for is a miracle half performed."

So he followed the peasant girl, a long tail of Moulotats dragging after him like a comet. On entering the house, he saw a peasant lying on the bed, his jaws so out of place that he looked as if he were trying to eat his ear. Benjamin inquired how the accident had happened, and whether it was not the result of a yawn or an outburst of laughter.

"It happened this morning at breakfast," answered his wife, "while he was trying to break a nut with his teeth."

"Good," said my uncle, his face lighting up. "Did you call anybody?"

"We sent for M. Arnout. He said it was an attack of paralysis."

"You could not have done better. I see Doctor Arnout knows paralysis as well as if he had invented it. What did he prescribe?"

"The medicine in this bottle."

My uncle examined the drug, saw it was an emetic, and threw the bottle into the street. His assurance produced an excellent effect.

"Monsieur Jew," said the good woman, "I see you are capable of performing the miracle we want."

"I could work a hundred miracles like this a day if I were supplied with them."

He had an iron spoon brought and wound several thicknesses of fine linen about the broad end. This improvised instrument he introduced into the patient's mouth, raised the upper jaw, which was protruding over the lower jaw, and put it back in its place. For the disease from which this Moulotat suffered was nothing but a dislocated jaw, which my uncle had discerned at once with those gray eyes of his which penetrated everything like nails. The paralytic of the morning declared he was completely cured, and ravenously attacked a cabbage soup that had been prepared for the family dinner.

With the rapidity of lightning the report spread among the crowd that father Pintot was eating cabbage soup. The sick, the halt, the lame, the blind, all implored my uncle's help. Mother Pintot, very proud of the miracle's having been performed in her family, introduced one of her cousins to my uncle to straighten out his body. His left shoulder looked like a ham. But my uncle was loath to risk his reputation, and answered that the best he could do would be to transfer the hump from the left to the right shoulder, which was a very painful miracle that scarcely two out of ten hump-backs of the common sort had the strength to endure.

Then he told the Moulotats that he was sorry

not to be able to stay there longer, but he did not dare keep the Holy Virgin waiting any more. And he went to join his sister, who was warming her feet in the village tavern and had had time to have the donkey fed.

My uncle and my grandmother had the greatest difficulty in escaping from the crowd, and the village bell was rung as long as they were in sight. My grandmother did not scold Benjamin. After all she was more pleased than vexed. The way in which Benjamin had extricated himself from the severe test flattered her sisterly pride, and she said that a man like Benjamin was well worth Mademoiselle Minxit, even with an income of two or three thousand francs thrown in.

The news of the Wandering Jew and the Holy Virgin, and even that of the ass, had already reached La Chapelle. When they entered the town, the women were kneeling in their doorways, and Benjamin, whose wits never failed him, gave them his blessing.

How Rathery cures the Peasant and blesses the Worshippers

CHAPTER VI

MONSIEUR MINXIT

MONSIEUR MINXIT received my uncle and my grandmother very pleasantly. He was a doctor, I know not why. He had not spent his youth in the company of corpses. One fine day the science of medicine sprouted in his head like a mushroom. If he knew medicine, it was because he had invented it. His parents had never dreamed of giving him a liberal education. The only Latin he knew was the Latin on the labels of his bottles, and at that had he depended on the labels, he would often have given hemlock for parsley. He had a fine library, but he never poked his nose into his books. He said that since these old books had been written, man's temperament had changed. Some people even said that all those precious works were only cardboard imitations with names celebrated in medicine printed in gilt on the backs. What confirmed them in their opinion was that whenever any one asked to see the library, M. Minxit had lost the key. However, he was an intelligent man, endowed with a good dose of common sense. He made up for lack of printed knowledge by large practical experience. Since he

was actually ignorant, he soon realized that in order to succeed he must persuade the multitude that he knew more than his rivals, and he made a specialty of urines. After twenty years' study of the science, he succeeded in distinguishing those that were cloudy from those that were clear, which did not prevent him from telling every one who came to him that he could tell a great man, a king, or a minister by his urine. As there were no kings or ministers or great men in the vicinity, he had no fear of being caught.

M. Minxit had very decided mannerisms. He talked loud, a great deal, and incessantly. He guessed what words were likely to impress the peasants and knew how to use them effectively in his talk. He had the gift of deceiving the people, a gift which consists of I know not what impalpable quality, impossible to describe, teach, or imitate. It is the inexplicable gift by which a shower of pennies falls into a simple surgeon's pocket, and by which the great man wins battles and founds empires; the gift that in some takes the place of genius, and that Napoleon of all men possessed in a supreme degree. I call it plain charlatanism. It is not my fault if the instrument with which Swiss tea is sold is the same as the one with which a throne is built. In the whole neighbourhood no one was willing to die except at M. Minxit's hands. However, he did not abuse his privilege. He was no more of a murderer than his rivals, only he made more money with his

M. Minxit

many-coloured vials than they did with their prescriptions. He had acquired a handsome fortune, and also had the faculty of spending his money to a good purpose. He seemed to give everything as if it cost nothing, and his clients, who streamed to him, always found open table at his house.

My uncle and M. Minxit were certain to be friends as soon as they met. These two natures resembled each other to the dot. They were as alike as two drops of wine, as two spoons cast in the same mould. They had the same appetites, and the same tastes, the same passions, the same way of looking at things, the same political opinions. Both cared little about those thousand little accidents, those thousand microscopic catastrophes, which we other fools make such an ado about. The man without a philosophy amid the miseries here below is like a man going bareheaded in the rain. The philosopher, on the other hand, has an umbrella to shield him against the storm. That was their opinion. They looked upon life as a farce, and they played their parts in it as gaily as possible. They had a sovereign contempt for those ill-advised people who make one long sob of their life. They wished theirs to be one long spell of laughter. Age had made no difference between them, except for a few wrinkles. They were like two trees of the same species, one old and the other in the full vigour of its sap, but bearing the same flower and the same fruit. Consequently the future father-in-law formed a prodigious friendship

for his son-in-law, and the son-in-law professed a high esteem for the father-in-law, all but his vials. Nevertheless my uncle entered into the alliance with M. Minxit reluctantly. He consented because his reason told him to and because he did not wish to displease his dear sister.

Since M. Minxit loved Benjamin, he found it quite natural that his daughter should love him, too. For every father, however good he may be, loves himself in the person of his children. He looks upon them as beings who ought to contribute to his comfort. If he chooses a son-in-law, he does so in the first place largely for himself and then a little for his daughter. If he is avaricious, he gives her to a skinflint. If he is a noble, he welds her to an escutcheon. If he is fond of chess, he gives her to a chess-player, for he must have some one to play with him in his old age. His daughter is a piece of property which he shares with his wife. Whether the property is enclosed by a flowering hedge or by a great ugly brick wall, whether it is cultivated to produce roses or rape-seed, is none of the property's business. The property has no advice to give to the experienced agriculturist; it is unskilled in selecting the seed best suited to it. Provided the souls and consciences of these good parents tell them their daughter is happy, that is enough. It is for her to accommodate herself to her condition. Every night the wife when doing up her curls and the husband when putting on his nightcap congratulate them-

selves on having married their child off so well. She does not love her husband, but she will get to. With patience one can accomplish anything. They do not know what a husband she does not love means to a woman. It is like a burning cinder that you cannot get out of your eye, or a steady toothache. Some women die of the anguish. Others go elsewhere in search of the love they cannot get from the corpse to which they have been attached. And some gently drop a pinch of arsenic into their fortunate husbands' soup, and have their tombstones inscribed, "he leaves an inconsolable widow." Such is the result of the pretended infallibility and the disguised egoism of the good parents.

If a young girl wanted to marry a monkey who had been naturalised as a man and a Frenchman, the father and mother would not consent, and the jocko would certainly have to serve the *acte respectueux*. Good parents, you say. They do not wish their daughter to make herself unhappy. Detestable egoists, I say. There is nothing more absurd than to put your own way of feeling in place of another's. It is like trying to substitute your own body for his. Here's a man who wants to die. He probably has good reasons for wanting to die. This young girl wants to marry a monkey. She probably prefers a monkey to a man. Why refuse her the chance of being happy in her own way? If she thinks she is happy who has the right to say she is not? The monkey will scratch her in caress-

ing her. What's that to you? She'd rather be scratched than caressed. Besides, if her husband scratches her, it is not her mamma's cheek that will bleed. Who objects to the dragon-fly's hovering over the reeds in the marshes instead of over the rose-bushes in the garden? Does the pike reproach the eel, its god-mother, for always staying in the mud at the bottom instead of rising to the water rippling at the surface?

Do you know why these good parents refuse their blessing to their daughter and her jocko? The father refuses because he wants a voter for a son-in-law, with whom he can talk literature or politics. The mother refuses because she needs a personable young man to give her his arm, take her to the play, and go out walking with her.

M. Minxit, after having uncorked some of his best bottles with Benjamin, showed him through his house, his cellar, his barn, and his stables. He took him on a walk through his garden and all around a large meadow stretching away from the back of his house. It was planted with trees and watered by a stream fed at one end by a gushing spring and forming a fish-pond at the other end. All this was greatly to be coveted. But, alas, fortune does not give anything for nothing, and in exchange for all this comfort it was necessary to marry Mademoiselle Minxit.

After all, Mademoiselle Minxit was as good as another; she was only two inches too tall; she was

neither dark nor light, neither blond nor red, neither stupid nor witty. She was a woman like twenty-five out of thirty. She knew how to talk very pertinently of a thousand trifles, and made very good cream cheese. It was much less against her than against marriage in general that my uncle rebelled, and if she had displeased him at first, it was because he had looked upon her as a heavy chain.

"So you have seen my estate," said M. Minxit. "When you are my son-in-law, it will be ours together, and when I am no longer here, too."

"Let us understand each other," said my uncle, "are you quite certain that Mademoiselle Arabella has no objections at all to marrying me?"

"Why should she? You don't do justice to yourself, Benjamin. Aren't you as handsome as any young fellow? Aren't you amiable when you choose to be and as much as you choose to be? And aren't you a man of intelligence, besides?"

"There is some truth in what you say, M. Minxit, but women are capricious, and I have heard that Mademoiselle Arabella has an inclination for a gentleman of this neighbourhood, a certain Monsieur de Pont-Cassé."

"A country squire," said M. Minxit, "a sort of musketeer who has squandered the fine estate his father left him on fine horses and embroidered coats. He did ask me for Arabella's hand, but I rejected his proposal most decidedly. In less than two years he would have devoured my fortune. You can see

I could not give my daughter to such a creature. Besides, he is a furious duellist. However, that does not matter, since he would have rid Arabella of his noble person one of these days."

"You are right, M. Minxit. But if Arabella loves this creature?"

"Nonsense, Benjamin! Arabella has too much of my blood in her veins to be smitten with a viscount. What I need is a child of the people, a man like you, Benjamin, with whom I can laugh, drink, and philosophise, a shrewd physician who will exploit my clients along with me and whose science will supply what the divination of urines may fail to reveal."

"One moment," said my uncle, "I warn you, Monsieur Minxit, I will not examine urines."

"Why not? Come, Benjamin, that emperor was a very wise man who said to his son: 'Do these gold pieces smell of urine?' If you knew how much presence of mind, resourcefulness, keenness, and even logic are required for diagnosis, by urines, you would not want to do anything else your whole life long. Perhaps you will be called a charlatan, but what is a charlatan? A man who has more wit than the multitude. And I ask you, is it from lack of desire or lack of wit that most doctors do not deceive their patients this way? Look, here comes my piper, probably to announce the arrival of some urine vial. I can give you a sample of my art on the spot."

"Well, piper," said M. Minxit to the musician, "what's new?"

"A peasant has come to consult you," he answered.

"Has Arabella made him talk to her yet?"

"Yes, Monsieur Minxit. He has his wife's urine. She fell downstairs about four or five steps, Mademoiselle Arabella doesn't remember exactly how many."

"The devil!" said M. Minxit. "Very stupid in Arabella. All the same, I will remedy that. Benjamin, go wait for me in the kitchen where the peasant is. You will see what a doctor who studies urine is."

M. Minxit entered his house through the little garden door, and five minutes later came into the kitchen looking utterly exhausted. He carried a riding-whip and wore a cloak splashed with mud up to the collar.

"Whew!" he said, falling into a chair. "What abominable roads! I am worn out. I have travelled more than fifteen leagues this morning. Take my boots off immediately and warm my bed."

"Monsieur Minxit, I beg of you!" said the peasant, presenting his vial.

"To the devil with your vial," said M. Minxit. "You see I can't do another thing. Just like you all. You always come to consult me just when I come back from a long way in the country."

"Father," said Arabella, "the man too is tired.

Do not force him to come again to-morrow."

"Well, then, let me see the vial," said M. Minxit, with an air of annoyance. He went to the window and added, "Your wife's urine, isn't it?"

"Yes, Monsieur Minxit," said the peasant.

"She has had a fall," added the doctor, examining the vial again.

"You guessed exactly."

"On a flight of steps, was it not?"

"Why, you are a sorcerer, Monsieur Minxit."

"And she rolled down four steps."

"This time you are wrong, Monsieur Minxit. It was down five steps."

"Nonsense, impossible. Go count your flight of steps over again. You will see there are only four in all."

"I assure you, Monsieur, there are five, and she didn't miss a single one."

"Astonishing," said M. Minxit, examining the vial again. "There certainly are only four steps here. By the way, did you bring me all the urine that your wife gave you?"

"I threw a little on the ground, because the vial was too full."

"No wonder I didn't get the right number. That is the cause of the deficit. It was the fifth step you poured out, you stupid fellow! So we will treat your wife as having rolled down a flight of five steps."

And he gave the peasant five or six little packages and as many vials, all labelled in Latin.

Rathery and Minxit
and how Minxit conducts his
Examinations

"I should have thought you would have given a bleeding," said my uncle.

"If it had been a fall from a horse, a fall from a tree or a fall in the road, yes. But a fall on a flight of steps should always be treated this way."

A little girl came in after the peasant.

"Well, how is your mother?" asked the doctor.

"Much better, Monsieur Minxit. But she cannot get her strength back, and I came to ask you what she should do."

"You ask me what she should do, and I wager you haven't a sou with which to buy medicine."

"Oh, no, dear Monsieur Minxit. My father has been out of work a whole week."

"Then why the devil does your mother take it into her head to be sick?"

"Don't worry, Monsieur Minxit. As soon as father gets work, you will be paid for your visits. He told me to tell you so."

"Nonsense again! Is your father crazy to expect to pay me for my visits when he has no bread in his house? For what does your imbecile of a father take me? Take your donkey this evening and get a sack of wheat at my mill. And take a basket of old wine and a quarter of mutton along with you from here. That is what your mother needs. If her strength doesn't come back in two or three days, let me know. Now go, my child."

"Well," said M. Minxit to Benjamin, "what do

you think of the practice of medicine by examining urines?"

"You are a fine, splendid man, Monsieur Minxit. That is your excuse. But, the devil! You will never get me to treat a patient who has fallen down stairs any other way than by bleeding."

"Then you are only a raw recruit in medicine. Don't you know peasants must have drugs? Otherwise they think you are neglecting them. Well, then, you shall not diagnose by urines. But it's a pity. You'd have been a famous hand at it."

CHAPTER VII

CONVERSATION AT M. MINXIT'S DINNER

THE dinner-hour arrived. Although M. Minxit had invited but a few persons beside those known to us, the priest, the notary, and one of his colleagues in the neighbourhood, the table was loaded down with a profusion of ducks and chickens, some lying in stately integrity in the midst of their sauce, others symmetrically spreading their disjointed members on the oval of their platters. The wine was from a certain hillside of Trucy, whose vines, in spite of the levelling-down that has taken place in our vineyards as in our society, have maintained their aristocracy, and still enjoy a deserved reputation.

"Why," said my uncle to M. Minxit at sight of this Homeric abundance, "you have a whole poultry-yard here, enough to satisfy a company of dragoons after manœuvres. Or perhaps you are expecting our friend Arthus?"

"In that case I would have spitted one fowl more," answered M. Minxit, laughing. "But if we ourselves can't manage all this, it will be easy to find others to finish our task. How about my officers, that is, my musicians, and the clients who will come

to-morrow with their vials? Don't I have to think of them? It is a principle of mine that he who has dinner prepared only for himself is not fit to dine."

"Quite right," replied my uncle; and after this philosophical reflection, he began to attack M. Minxit's chickens as if he had a personal spite against them.

The guests were suited to each other. For that matter, my uncle was suited to everybody, and everybody was suited to him. They frankly and very noisily enjoyed M. Minxit's bounteous hospitality.

"Piper," said M. Minxit to one of the waiters, "bring in the Burgundy, and tell the musicians to come in with arms and baggage, the drunken ones not excepted." The musicians entered at once and ranged themselves in a ring around the room. M. Minxit uncorked a few bottles of Burgundy, then lifted his full glass solemnly, and said:

"Gentlemen, to the health of M. Benjamin Rathery, the first doctor in the bailiwick. I present him to you as my son-in-law, and pray you to love him as you love me. Let the music play."

An infernal din of bass drum, triangle, cymbals, and clarinet broke out in the dining-room, so that my uncle was obliged to ask mercy on behalf of the guests. Mademoiselle Minxit made a wry face over the announcement, somewhat too definite and premature. Benjamin, who had something else to do

than observe what was going on around him, did not notice it. But the sign of repugnance did not escape my grandmother. Her pride was deeply wounded. If Benjamin was not the handsomest fellow in the country to everybody, he was to his sister at least. After thanking M. Minxit for the honour he did her brother, she added, biting each syllable as if she had poor Arabella between her teeth, that the principal, the only reason that had moved Benjamin to solicit M. Minxit's alliance was the high esteem in which M. Minxit was held in all the country round.

Benjamin, feeling that his sister had been tactless, hastened to add, "And also the graces and charms with which Mademoiselle Arabella is so abundantly provided, and which promise days spun of gold and silk to the happy mortal who shall be her husband." Then, as if to still the pangs of conscience that this sorry compliment caused him—the only one he had yet bestowed on Mademoiselle Minxit and which his sister had obliged him to—he set furiously upon a chicken's wing and emptied a huge glass of Burgundy at one draught.

There were three doctors present. They were bound to talk medicine, and they did.

"You just now said, M. Minxit," said Fata, "that your son-in-law was the first doctor in the bailiwick. I do not protest in my own behalf, although I have made certain cures. But what do you think of Doctor Arnout of Clamecy?"

"Ask Benjamin," said M. Minxit. "He knows him better than I do."

"Oh, M. Minxit," answered my uncle, "a rival!"

"What difference does that make? You don't have to run your rivals down, do you? Tell us what you think of him, just to oblige Fata."

"Since you insist, I think Doctor Arnout wears a superb wig."

"Why isn't a doctor who wears a wig as good as a doctor who wears a queue?" asked Fata.

"A delicate question, Monsieur Fata, especially since you yourself wear a wig. But I will try to explain myself without wounding anybody's pride. Here is a doctor who has his head stuffed full of knowledge. He has studied all the old books ever written about medicine. He knows to a tee the Greek words from which the five or six hundred diseases that afflict poor humanity are derived. Well, if his intelligence is limited, I should not like to trust him to cure my little finger. I would prefer an intelligent mountebank. His science is a lantern without a light. It has been said that whatever a man is worth, his land is worth. It would be equally true to say that whatever a man is worth, his knowledge is worth. That is especially true of medicine, which is a science of hypotheses. Causes must be divined by equivocal and uncertain effects. The pulse that is dumb under the finger of a fool confides marvellous secrets to the man of brains. Two things above all are necessary to success in medi-

cine, and these two things are not to be acquired. They are insight and intelligence."

"You forget the cymbals and the bass drum," said M. Minxit, laughing.

"Oh," said Benjamin, "speaking of your bass drum, I have an excellent idea. Does there happen to be a vacancy in your orchestra?"

"For whom?" said M. Minxit.

"For an old sergeant of my acquaintance and a poodle."

"On what instrument can your two *protégés* play?"

"I do not know," said Benjamin. "Any you like, probably."

"At any rate we can have your old sergeant groom my four horses until my music-master has familiarised him with some instrument. Or else he can roll my pills."

"By the way," said my uncle, "we can use him to still better advantage. He has a face as brown as a chicken just from the spit. You'd think he did nothing his whole life except cross and recross the equator. You would take him for the Tropic in person. Besides, he is as dry as an old burnt bone. We will say we extracted from his body the grease we make our salves of. Our salves will sell better than bear's grease. Or else we will pass him off for a Nubian a hundred and forty years old, who has lived to this extraordinary age by using an elixir, the secret of which he has transmitted to us in consideration of a life pension; and we will sell the

precious elixir for the mere bagatelle of fifteen sous a bottle. No one will afford to be without it."

"Heavens," said M. Minxit, "I see you understand the practice of medicine on the scale of grand orchestra. Send me your man as soon as you like. I will take him into my service, whether as a Nubian or as a dried bone."

At this moment a domestic entered the dining-room in a great fright, and told my uncle that about twenty women were tugging at his donkey's tail, and, when he had tried to disperse them with a whip, they had come very near tearing him to pieces with their sharp finger-nails.

"I know what it is," said my uncle, and burst out laughing. "They are pulling hairs from the Holy Virgin's ass to keep as relics."

M. Minxit asked for an explanation.

"Gentlemen," he cried, when my uncle had finished his story, "we are impious men if we do not worship Benjamin. Pastor, you must make a saint of him."

"I protest," said Benjamin. "I don't want to go to Heaven. I shall certainly not meet any of you there."

"Yes, laugh, gentlemen," said my grandmother, after having laughed herself. "I don't feel like laughing. Benjamin's practical jokes always end that way. M. Durand will make us pay for his ass, unless we return it in the same condition he gave it to us in."

"At any rate," said my uncle, "he cannot make us pay for more than the tail. Would a man who cuts off my queue—and my queue, without flattering it, is surely worth as much as the tail of M. Durand's donkey—be as guilty in the eyes of justice as if he had killed me?"

"Certainly not," said M. Minxit, "and to tell you the truth, I should not esteem you one obole the less for it."

Meanwhile the yard was filling with women who maintained a respectful attitude, as though they were near a chapel in which divine service is being held and which is too small to hold all the worshippers. Many of them were kneeling.

"You must rid us of these people," said M. Minxit to Benjamin.

"Nothing easier," answered Benjamin. He went to the window and told the good people that they would have plenty of time to see the Holy Virgin. She expected to remain two days at M. Minxit's, and the next Sunday she would not fail to attend high mass. At this assurance the people withdrew satisfied.

"Such parishioners," said the curé, "do me little honour. I must reprove them in my sermon next Sunday. How can any one be so simple-minded as to take a donkey's dirty tail for a sacred object?"

"But, pastor," responded Benjamin, "you who are so philosophical at table, haven't you in your church under glass two or three bones as white as

paper, which you call the relics of Saint Maurice?"

"Those are exhausted relics," said M. Minxit. "It is more than fifty years since they worked miracles. My friend the priest would do well to get rid of them and sell them to be made into bone-black. I would take them myself to make *album graecum,* if he would let me have them at a reasonable price."

"What is *album graecum?*" asked my grandmother, innocently.

"Madame," answered M. Minxit, with a bow, "it is *Greek white.* I regret I cannot tell you more about it."

"For my part," said the notary, a little old man in a white wig, with vivacious eyes full of mischief, "I don't find fault with the pastor for the place of honour he has given the shin-bones of Saint Maurice in his church. Saint Maurice undoubtedly had shin-bones when he was alive. Why should they not be there as well as anywhere? I am surprised that the vestry hasn't our patron saint's riding-boots, too. But I could wish that the curé in his turn might be more tolerant and might not rebuke his parishioners for their faith in the Wandering Jew. Not to believe enough is as sure a sign of ignorance as to believe too much."

"What," replied the curé quickly, "you, Monsieur notary, you believe in the Wandering Jew?"

"Why should I not believe in him just as well as in Saint Maurice?"

"And you, Doctor," said he, addressing Fata, "do you believe in the Wandering Jew?"

"H'm, h'm!" said the latter, taking a huge pinch of snuff.

"And you, honourable Monsieur Minxit?"

"I agree with my colleague," interrupted M. Minxit, "except that I'll take a glass of wine instead of a pinch of snuff."

"But surely you, Monsieur Rathery, you who pass for a philosopher, I do hope you do not honour the Wandering Jew with belief in his eternal peregrinations."

"Why not?" said my uncle. "You believe in Jesus Christ."

"Oh, that's different," answered the curé. "I believe in Jesus Christ because neither his existence nor his divinity can be called in question, because the evangelists who wrote his history are men worthy of credence. They could not have been mistaken. They had no motive for deceiving their neighbours, and even if they had wanted to, they could not have succeeded in accomplishing the fraud.

"If the facts recorded by them were invented, if the Gospel, like *Télémaque,* were a sort of philosophical and religious novel, then, on the appearance of that fatal book which was to spread trouble and division over the whole surface of the earth, which was to separate husband from wife, children from their fathers, which made poverty honourable,

which made the slave the equal of the master, which upset all received ideas, which honoured everything that up to that time had been despised, and threw everything that had been honoured into the fire of hell as rubbish, which overturned the old religion of the Pagans, and on its ruins established the gibbet of a poor carpenter's son in the place of altars——"

"Monsieur Curé," said M. Minxit, "your period is too long. You must cut it with a glass of wine."

The curé, having drunk a glass of wine, continued:

"On the appearance of that book, I say, the Pagans would have uttered an immense cry of protest, and the Jews, whom it accused of the greatest crime that a people can commit, a deicide, would have pursued it with their eternal denunciations."

"But the Wandering Jew," said my uncle, "has the support of an authority no less powerful than the Gospel—the rhymed chronicle of the burghers of Brussels in Brabant, who met him at the gates of the city and regaled him with a pot of fresh beer.

"The apostles, I admit, are men worthy of faith. But, inspiration aside, what were they really? Tramps, men without hearth or home, who paid no taxes, and whom the authorities to-day would prosecute as vagabonds. The burghers of Brussels, on the contrary, were respectable men, householders. Some, I am sure, were syndics or church-wardens. If the apostles and the Brussels burghers could have a discussion before the bailiff, I am sure the magistrate

would defer to the oath of the Brussels burghers.

"The Brussels burghers could not have been mistaken. A burgher is not a puppet, a boon companion, or a man of gingerbread. And it is no harder to tell an old man of over seventeen hundred years of age from an old man of to-day than it is to tell an ordinary old man from a child of five.

"The Brussels burghers had no motives for deceiving their fellows. It made no difference to them whether or not there was a man who travels on forever. And what glory could have accrued to them for having sat at table in an ale-house and drunk freshly tapped beer with the superlative of vagabonds, with a sort of damned creature, a hundred times more despicable than a galley-slave, to whom I myself would not like to take off my hat? As a matter of fact the Brussels burghers acted rather against than for their interest in publishing their chronicle. The ballad is not calculated to inspire a high opinion of their poetic ability. The tailor Millot-Rataut, whose *Grand Noël* I have many a time found wrapped around a bit of Brie cheese, is a Virgil in comparison with them.

"The Brussels burghers could not have deceived their people, even had they wished to. Had the facts celebrated in their chronicle been invented, the inhabitants of Brussels would have protested on the appearance of the document. The police would have consulted their registers to see if a certain Isaac Laquedem had passed through Brussels on such and

such a day, and they would have protested. The cobblers, whose respectable guild was forever dishonoured by the brutal conduct of the Wandering Jew, who was one of the craft, would not have failed to protest; in short, there would have been a concerted storm of protests sufficient to make the towers of the capital of Brabant topple and fall.

"Besides, in the matter of credibility, the ballad of the Wandering Jew has notable advantages over the Gospels. It did not fall from heaven like a meteoric stone. It has a precise date. The first copy was deposited in the royal library, duly inscribed with the printer's name and street number. The Gospels, on the other hand, are not dated. The ballad of Brussels is illustrated by a portrait of the Wandering Jew, in a three-cornered hat, Polish coat, riding boots, and with a tremendously long cane. But no medallion has come down to us bearing the picture of Jesus Christ. The chronicle of the Wandering Jew was written in an enlightened, investigating century, more disposed to cut down its beliefs than to add to them, while the Gospels appeared suddenly like a torch lighted by no one knows whom in the darkness of a century given over to gross superstitions, and among a people plunged in the deepest ignorance, whose history is one long series of superstitions and barbarisms."

"Permit me, Monsieur Benjamin," said the notary. "You said that the Brussels burghers could not have been mistaken as to the identity of the Wandering

Jew. Yet this morning the inhabitants of Moulot took you for the Wandering Jew. In the capacity of Wandering Jew you yourself worked an authentic miracle in the presence of the entire people of Moulot. So your demonstration fails in one point, and your rules regarding historical certainty are not infallible."

"The objection is a strong one," said Benjamin, scratching his head. "I admit I can't answer it. But it applies to Monsieur Curé's Jesus Christ as well as to my Wandering Jew."

"But I hope you believe in Jesus Christ, Benjamin?" interrupted my grandmother, who always wanted to come down to facts.

"Undoubtedly, my dear sister, I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in him the more firmly because without believing in the divinity of Jesus Christ one cannot believe in the existence of God, since the only proofs of the existence of God are the miracles of Jesus Christ. But then that does not prevent me from believing in the Wandering Jew, or, rather, shall I tell you what the Wandering Jew means to me?

"The Wandering Jew is the picture of the Jewish people sketched by some unknown poet of the people on the walls of a cottage. The myth is so striking that you'd have to be blind not to see it.

"The Wandering Jew has no hearth nor home nor legal and political domicile. The Jewish people have no country.

"The Wandering Jew is obliged to travel on without rest, without stopping, without taking breath, which must be very fatiguing to him in his Hessian boots. He has already been around the world seven times. The Jewish people are not firmly established anywhere. Everywhere they live in tents. They go and come incessantly like the waves of the ocean, and they too, have already been around the world many times, like foam floating on the surface of the nations, like a straw borne by the current of civilisation.

"The Wandering Jew always has five sous in his pocket. The Jewish people, continually ruined by the exactions of the feudal lords and by the royal confiscations, always rise to the top of prosperity again, like a cork. Their wealth grew of itself.

"The Wandering Jew can spend only five sous at a time. The Jewish people, obliged to conceal their wealth, have become sparing and close-fisted. They spend little.

"The suffering of the Wandering Jew will last forever. The Jewish people can no more reunite into a national body than the ashes of an oak struck by lightning can make a tree again. They are scattered over the earth until the end of the centuries.

"To speak seriously, it is doubtless a superstition to believe in the Wandering Jew. But I say to you as is said in the Gospel, let him who is free from all superstition cast the first sarcasm at the inhabitants of Moulot. The fact is, we are all supersti-

How Rathery administers his Blessing again and returns Home with his sulking Sister

tious, some more, others less, and often the man with a wen on his ear as big as a potato makes sport of the man with a wart on his chin.

"There are not two Christians having the same beliefs who admit and reject the same things. One fasts on Friday and does not attend divine service. Another attends divine service and eats meat on Friday. Some lady will mock at Friday and Sunday alike, yet would consider herself damned if she were not married in church.

"Let religion be a beast with seven horns. He who believes in only six horns scoffs at him who believes in seven, and he who admits but five horns scoffs at him who admits six. Then comes the deist who scoffs at all the others, and finally there is the atheist. And yet the atheist believes in Cagliostro and consults the fortune-tellers. In short, there is only one man who is not superstitious, the man who believes in nothing but what is demonstrated to him."

It was past nightfall when my grandmother announced her wish to start.

"I will let Benjamin go on only one condition," said M. Minxit, "that he will promise to take part in a grand hunting party on Sunday which I will give in his honour. He must familiarise himself with his woods and the hares."

"But I do not know the mere elements of hunting," said my uncle. "I can easily tell a hare stew from a rabbit stew, but may Millot-Rataut sing me

his *Grand Noël* if I am capable of telling a hare on the run from a rabbit on the run."

"So much the worse for you, my friend. But that is one reason more why you should come. One should know a little of everything."

"You will see me do something bad. I shall kill one of your musicians."

"Oh, be careful not to do that, at least. I shall have to pay his bereaved family more than he is worth. But to avoid an accident you shall hunt with your sword."

"Very well, I promise," said my uncle.

Thereupon he and his dear sister took leave of M. Minxit.

"Do you know," said Benjamin to my grandmother when they were on their way, "I would rather marry M. Minxit than his daughter."

"Don't wish for anything you can not get, but do wish for everything you can get," answered my grandmother, dryly.

"But——"

"But—look out for the donkey, and don't prick him with your sword the way you did this morning. That is all I ask of you."

"You are cross with me, sister. I should like to know why."

"Well, I will tell you. Because you drank too much, discussed too much, and did not say a word to Mademoiselle Arabella. Now, let me alone."

CHAPTER VIII

HOW MY UNCLE KISSED A MARQUIS

THE following Saturday my uncle spent the night at Corvol.

They started the next morning at sunrise. M. Minxit was accompanied by all his people and several friends, among whom was his colleague Fata. It was one of those glorious days that gloomy winter occasionally bestows upon the earth, like a jailer bestowing a smile. February seemed to have borrowed its sun from April. The sky was clear, and the south wind filled the air with a soft warmth. The river was steaming in the distance among the willows. The morning hoar frost hung in little drops from the branches of the bushes. For the first time in the year the birds were singing in the meadows, and the brooks running down the mountain of Flez, awakened by the warmth of the sun, babbled at the foot of the hedges.

"Monsieur Fata," said my uncle, "this is a fine day. Shall we take a walk under the wet branches of the woods?"

"I don't care to, my colleague," said M. Fata. "If you will come to my house, I will show you a

four-headed child which I keep sealed in a bottle. M. Minxit offers me three hundred francs for it."

"You would do well to let him have it," said my uncle, "and put currant wine in the bottle instead."

Nevertheless, having a good pair of legs, and it being only two short leagues from there to Varzy, he decided to go with his colleague. So Fata and he left the hunting party and plunged into a side-path that disappeared in the meadow. Soon they found themselves opposite Saint-Pierre du Mont. Saint-Pierre du Mont is a big hill on the road from Clamecy to Varzy. At its base it is covered with meadows streaming with water-courses, but at its summit it is shorn and bare. It is like a huge clump of earth raised on the plain by a gigantic mole. At that time there stood on its bare and scurvy cranium the remains of a feudal castle. To-day it is replaced by an elegant country-house, in which a cattle-raiser lives. Thus it is that the works of man, like those of nature, imperceptibly decompose and form again.

The walls of the castle were dilapidated and its battlements toothless in many spots. The towers seemed as though broken off in the middle and reduced to stumps. Its moats, half dried up, were encumbered with tall grass and a forest of reeds, and its drawbridge had had to be replaced by a stone bridge. The sinister shadow of this old feudal ruin cast a gloom on the entire neighbourhood. The cottages had moved back from it, some going to

the neighbouring hill and forming the village of Flez, others descending into the valley and grouping themselves as a hamlet along the road.

The lord of this old establishment at that time was a certain Marquis de Cambyse. M. de Cambyse was tall, stout, heavily built, and had the strength of a giant—a veritable old suit of armour made of flesh. He was of a violent, passionate, excessively irascible nature, infatuated with his nobility, and fancying the Cambyse family was an unparalleled work of creation.

At one time he had been an officer of musketeers, I know not of what colour. But he was ill at ease at court, his will there was repressed, his violence could not find free vent, and he felt stifled amid the dust of the landed aristocrats which sparkled and whirled around the throne. He had returned to his estate, and lived there like a little monarch. Though time had taken away the old privileges of the nobility one by one, he had managed to keep them, and he exercised them to the full. He was still absolute master, not only of his domains, but also of the whole country round. Barring the buckler, he was a veritable feudal lord. He beat the peasants, took their wives from them when they were pretty, invaded their lands with his hounds, sent his servants to trample down their crops, and subjected the burghers whom he came across in the vicinity of his mountain to a thousand annoyances.

He practised despotism and violence from caprice,

for entertainment, but especially from pride. To be the most eminent personage in the vicinity, he thought he must be the wickedest. He knew no better way of showing his superiority than by oppression. To be famous he made himself a detestable villain. Except in size, he was like the flea whose only way to make you aware of its presence in the bed-clothes is biting you. Although rich, he had creditors, and he made it a point of honour not to pay them. The terror of his name was such that not a sheriff's officer in the country could be found willing to serve a paper on him. A single one, father Ballivet, had dared to serve a writ on him with his own hand, speaking to him in person, but he had risked his life in doing it. Honour to generous father Ballivet, the royal process-server, who served writs all over the world and two leagues beyond, as the spiteful wags said in order to dim the glory of this great process-server.

This is how he managed it. He wrapped his document in a half-dozen envelopes cunningly sealed, and presented it to M. de Cambyse as a package coming from the castle of Vilaine. While the Marquis was unwrapping the document, he sneaked out stealthily, reached the main gate, and mounted his horse, which he had fastened to a tree some distance from the castle. The Marquis was furious when he found out what the package contained and that he had been duped by a process-server, and he ordered his domestics to go in pursuit of him. But

father Ballivet was beyond their reach, and mocked at them with a gesture of the hand that I cannot describe here.

M. de Cambyse felt scarcely greater scruples about discharging his gun at a peasant than at a fox. He had already maimed two or three, who were known in the neighbourhood as M. de Cambyse's cripples, and several prominent inhabitants of Clamecy had been the victims of his mean practical jokes. Although he was not yet very old, the honourable lord had perpetrated enough bloody tricks to entitle him to two life-sentences. But his family stood well at court, and the protection of his noble relatives secured him against prosecution. The fact is, each one takes his pleasure where he finds it. The good King Louis XV., who entertained himself so merrily and pleasantly at Versailles and gave parties to the lords and ladies of his court, did not wish his peers in the provinces to be bored on their estates, and he would have been very much vexed had they had no peasants to howl under their whips, or had there been no burghers for them to insult. Louis, called the Well-Beloved, was determined to deserve the love of his subjects. It is clear, therefore, that the Marquis de Cambyse was as inviolable as a constitutional king, and that neither justice nor the police could touch him.

Benjamin was fond of declaiming against M. de Cambyse. He called him the Gessler of the neighbourhood, and had often expressed the desire to

meet this man face to face. His wish was fulfilled only too soon, as you will now see.

At sight of the black, shadowy ruins that stood out sharply against the azure of the sky, my uncle, philosopher that he was, fell into meditation.

"Monsieur Rathery," said his colleague, pulling him by the sleeve, "it isn't safe to be in the neighbourhood of this castle, I warn you."

"What, Monsieur Fata, are you too afraid of a Marquis?"

"But, Monsieur Rathery, you know I am a doctor with a wig."

"That's the way with all of them!" cried my uncle, giving free rein to his indignation. "There are three hundred citizens to one nobleman, and they allow the nobleman to walk over their bellies. And they flatten themselves all they can, too, lest the noble personage stumble!"

"What do you expect, M. Rathery? Against force——"

"But it is you who have the force, you wretch! You are like the ox who lets a child lead him from the green pasture to the shambles. Oh, the people are cowards, cowards! I say it in bitter sorrow, as a mother says that her child has a bad heart. The man who sacrifices himself for the people is always left to the mercy of the executioner, and if there is no rope with which to hang him, the people undertake to furnish it. Two thousand years have passed over the ashes of the Gracchi, and seventeen hundred

and fifty years over the cross of Jesus, and they are still the same people. They sometimes have spurts of courage, and then fire issues from their mouths and nostrils. But slavery is their normal condition. They always return to it, as a tamed canary returns to its cage. You see the brook rushing onward swollen by a sudden storm, and you take it for a mighty river. The next day you pass again and you find only a mere thread of water hiding under the grass growing on the banks, with nothing left of the torrential flood of the day before but a few straws hanging from the branches of the bushes. The people are strong when they wish to be. But look out, their strength lasts only a moment. Those who rely upon them build their house upon the frozen surface of a lake."

At that moment a man dressed in a rich hunting suit crossed the road, followed by barking dogs and a long train of attendants. Fata turned pale.

"M. de Cambyse," he said to my uncle, and bowed profoundly. But Benjamin stood erect, without doffing his hat, like a Spanish grandee.

Nothing was more likely to offend the terrible Marquis than the presumption of this common citizen who refused him the ordinary homage on the edge of his domains and in front of his castle. It was, moreover, a very bad example, which might become contagious.

"Clodhopper," said he to my uncle, with his lordly air, "why don't you salute me?"

"And you," answered my uncle, measuring him from head to foot with his grey eyes, "why didn't you salute me?"

"Don't you know I am the Marquis de Cambyse, lord of all this domain?"

"And you, don't you know I am Benjamin Rathery, doctor of medicine, of Clamecy?"

"Really," said the Marquis, "so you are a sawbones? I congratulate you. It is a fine title you have."

"It is as good a title as yours. To acquire it I had to pursue long and serious studies. But what did that *de* cost you which you put before your name? The king can make twenty marquises a day, but I defy him, with all his power, to make one doctor. A doctor has his usefulness. You'll find it out later, perhaps. But what is a marquis good for?"

The Marquis de Cambyse had breakfasted well that morning. He was in a good humour.

"A funny old codger," he said to his steward. "I would rather have met him than a deer. And this one," he added, pointing his finger at Fata, "who is he?"

"M. Fata, of Varzy, Marquis," said the doctor, bowing reverentially a second time.

"Fata," said my uncle, "you are a poltroon. I suspected as much, but you will have to answer to me for this conduct."

"What," said the Marquis to Fata, "you are acquainted with this man?"

"Very slightly, Monsieur Marquis, I swear it. I know him only because I have dined with him at M. Minxit's. But the moment he fails in the respect he owes the nobility, I know him no more."

"And I," said my uncle, "am just beginning to know him."

"What, Monsieur Fata of Varzy," continued the Marquis, "do you dine with that scoundrel Minxit?"

"Oh, quite by chance, Monseigneur, when I happened to pass through Corvol one day. I know very well that Minxit is a man one ought not to associate with. He is a hare-brained fellow, conceited on account of his wealth, and thinks himself as good as a nobleman. Wow! Wow! Who gave me that kick from behind?"

"I did," said Benjamin, "in behalf of M. Minxit."

"Now," said the Marquis, "you have nothing more to do here, Monsieur Fata. Leave me alone with your travelling companion. So then," he added, addressing my uncle, "you persist in refusing to salute me?"

"If you salute me first, I will salute you next," said Benjamin.

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes."

"Have you carefully considered what you are doing?"

"Listen," said my uncle, "I will show deference

for your title, and prove to you how accommodating I am in everything that concerns etiquette."

With this he took a coin from his pocket, and, tossing it in the air, said to the Marquis:

"Heads or tails? Noble or doctor, whomso fortune designates shall be the first to salute, and from this there shall be no appeal."

"Insolent fellow," said the fat, chubby-faced steward. "Don't you see that you are lacking most scandalously in respect to Monseigneur. If I were in his place, I would have given you a beating long ago."

"My friend," answered Benjamin, "stick to your figures. Your lord pays you to cheat him, not to give him advice."

Just then a game-keeper stole behind my uncle, and knocked his three-cornered hat into the mud. Benjamin was remarkably strong. As he turned round, the broad grin at the success of his trick was still on the game-keeper's lips. My uncle with one blow of his iron fist sent the man sprawling downward so that he remained lying, half in the ditch, half in the hedge on the roadside. The man's comrades wanted to extricate him from the amphibious position he had gotten into, but M. de Cambyse would not allow it. "The rogue must learn," said he, "that the right to insolence does not belong to the common people."

I really do not understand why my uncle, generally so philosophical, did not yield with good grace

to necessity. I know very well that it is vexing to a proud citizen of the people, who feels his worth, to be obliged to salute a Marquis. But when we are under the coercion of force, our free will is gone. What a man does in such circumstances is not a personal act but the result of external power. We are then merely a machine not responsible for its acts. The only one deserving of blame for whatever is shameful or guilty in our conduct is the man who does violence to us. I have, therefore, always looked upon the unconquerable resistance of martyrs to their persecutors as obstinacy scarcely worthy of being canonised. Do you want to throw me into boiling oil, Antiochus, if I refuse to eat pork? Well, I must first of all call your attention to the fact that it is not right to fry a man as we fry a fish. But, if you persist in your demands, I will eat your stew, and I will eat it with pleasure even if it is well-cooked. For to you, to you alone, Antiochus, can its digestion be dangerous. You, Monsieur de Cambyse, level your gun at my breast and demand that I salute you? Well, Marquis, I have the honour to salute you. I know very well that after this formality you will be worth no more and I no less. There is only one case in which we ought to stand up against force, whatever the consequences, and that is when they try to force us to commit an act which is harmful to the people, for we have no right to set our personal interest before the public interest.

But then my uncle was of a different opinion. As he stood firm in his refusal, M. de Cambyse had him seized by his menials and ordered them to return to the castle. Benjamin, pulled in front and pushed behind, and entangled in his sword, nevertheless protested with all his might against the violence to which they subjected him, and still found a way to distribute blows right and left. There were some peasants at work in the neighbouring fields. My uncle appealed to them for help; but they were careful not to heed his appeals, and even laughed at his martyrdom to show their obsequiousness to the Marquis.

When they had reached the castle yard, M. de Cambyse ordered that the gate be closed. He had the bell rung to summon all his people. They brought two arm-chairs, one for him and one for his steward, and then he began a pretense of deliberating with him over the fate of my poor uncle. My uncle maintained his proud attitude before this parody of justice, never for a moment relinquishing his scornful, mocking air.

The worthy steward was for twenty-five lashes and forty-eight hours in the old dungeon, but the Marquis was in good humour, he even seemed to be slightly under the influence of wine.

"Have you anything to say in your defence?" said he to Benjamin.

"Take your sword," answered my uncle, "and come with me thirty feet away from your

castle, and I will show you my methods of defence."

Then the Marquis rose and said:

"The court, after due deliberation, condemns the individual here present to kiss Monsieur the Marquis de Cambyse, lord of all these domains, ex-lieutenant of musketeers, master of the wolf-hounds of the bailiwick of Clamecy, etc., etc., etc., in a spot which the said Lord de Cambyse will make known to him forthwith."

Saying which, he began to undo his breeches. The menials who immediately understood his intention, began to applaud with all their might and cry, "Long live the Marquis de Cambyse!"

My poor uncle was furious with rage. He said later that he feared a stroke of apoplexy. Two game-keepers stood with their guns levelled at him, with the order from the Marquis to fire at his first signal.

"One, two," said the nobleman.

Benjamin knew that the Marquis was a man to execute his threat. He did not wish to run the risk of being shot, and . . . a few seconds later the justice of the Marquis was accomplished.

"All right," said M. de Cambyse, "I am satisfied with you. Now you can boast of having kissed a Marquis."

He had him escorted to the gate by two armed game-keepers. Benjamin fled like a dog to whose tail a mischievous urchin had fastened a wooden

slipper. As he was on the road to Corvol, he kept straight on in that direction, and went to M. Minxit's.

CHAPTER IX

M. MINXIT PREPARES FOR WAR

M. MINXIT had already been informed, I know not by whom—by rumour, no doubt, which meddles in everything—that Benjamin was held a prisoner at Saint-Pierre du Mont. To free his friend he knew no better way than to take the castle of the Marquis by assault and then level it to the ground. You laugh? But find me in history a war more just. Where the government does not know how to make the laws respected, the citizens must take the law into their own hands.

M. Minxit's yard resembled a camp. The musicians, on horseback, armed with guns of all sorts, were already drawn up in battle array. The old sergeant, who had lately entered the doctor's service, had taken command of this picked body of men. From the middle of the ranks rose a large flag made out of a window-curtain, on which M. Minxit had inscribed in large letters, that no one might fail to see them: THE LIBERTY OF BENJAMIN OR THE EARS OF M. DE CAMBYSE. That was his ultimatum.

In the second line came the infantry, consisting of

five or six farm-hands carrying their picks on their shoulders, and four roofers of the neighbourhood each armed with his ladder.

The transport train was represented by the barouche. It was loaded with fagots with which to fill up the moats of the castle, although time itself had filled them up in several places. But M. Minxit insisted on doing things in the proper regular way. He had taken the further precaution of putting his case of surgical instruments and a big flask of rum in one of the pockets of the carriage.

The warlike doctor, with feathers in his hat and an unsheathed sword in his hand, bustled about and with a voice of thunder urged his men on to hasten the preparations for departure.

It is customary for a general to address his army, before it advances to battle. M. Minxit was not a man to omit a formality of this kind. This is what he said to his soldiers:

"Soldiers, I will not say to you that Europe has its eyes fixed upon you, that your names will be handed down to posterity, that they will be engraved in the temple of glory, etc., etc., etc., because those are empty phrases, useless chaff and barren seeds thrown out to nincompoops. What I have to say is this:

"In all wars soldiers fight for the benefit of their sovereign. Generally they have not even the advantage of knowing why they die. But you are going to fight in your own interest and in the interest of

How Minxit rouses
his troops and is afterwards
quieted by Page.

your wives and children, if you have any. M. Benjamin, whom you all have the honour to know, is to become my son-in-law. In this capacity he will reign with me, over you, and when I shall be no more, he will be your master. He will be under infinite obligation to you for all of the dangers to which you expose yourselves on his behalf, and he will reward you generously.

"But it is not only to restore liberty to my son-in-law that you have taken up arms. Our expedition will result also in the deliverance of the country from a tyrant who oppresses it, who ruins your grain, who beats you when he meets you, and who behaves very improperly with your wives. One good reason is enough to make a Frenchman fight bravely. You have two, so you are invincible. The dead shall have a decent burial at my expense, and the wounded shall be cared for in my house. Long live M. Benjamin Rathery! Death to Cambyse! Destruction to his castle!"

"Bravo, Monsieur Minxit!" said my uncle, who had just come in through a back gate, as became a conquered man. "That was a fine speech. If you had delivered it in Latin, I should have thought that you pirated it from Titus Livius."

At sight of my uncle a general hurrah went up from the army. M. Minxit gave the command, "At ease!" and took Benjamin into his dining-room. There my uncle gave a most circumstantial account of his adventures, and with a fidelity to

truth that statesmen do not always show in writing their memoirs.

M. Minxit was outraged at the insult offered to his son-in-law, and ground all the stumps in his jaw. At first he could express himself only in curses, but when his indignation had quieted a little, he said, "Benjamin, you are nimbler than I am. You take command of the army, and we will march against Cambyse's castle. Where its turrets stood, there shall henceforth grow only nettles and quitch-grass."

"If you say so," said my uncle, "we will level even the mountain of Saint-Pierre. But, saving the respect that I owe to your opinion, I believe that we ought to act strategically. We will scale the walls of the castle by night, we will seize De Cambyse and all his lackeys drunk with wine and sleep, as Virgil says, and they will all have to kiss us."

"A fine idea," answered M. Minxit. "We have a good league and a half to travel before we reach the place, and it will be dark in an hour. Run and kiss my daughter, and we will start."

"One moment," said my uncle. "The devil! What a hurry you are in! I have eaten nothing to-day, and I should rather like to breakfast before we start."

"Then," said M. Minxit, "I will give the order to break ranks, and a ration of wine shall be distributed to our soldiers to keep them in breath."

"That's right," answered my uncle, "they will

have time to drink themselves drunk while I am taking my refreshments."

Fortunately for the castle of the Marquis, lawyer Page, who was returning from a legal examination, came and asked leave to dine at M. Minxit's.

"You come just at the right time, Monsieur Page," said the warlike doctor. "I am going to enroll you in our expedition."

"What expedition?" asked Page, who had not studied law in order to go to war.

Then my uncle related his adventure and how he proposed to avenge himself.

"Take care," said lawyer Page. "The thing is more serious than you think. In the first place, as to success. Do you really expect to overcome a garrison of thirty domestics commanded by a lieutenant of musketeers with seven or eight half-cripples?"

"Twenty men and all hale and hearty, Monsieur attorney," said M. Minxit.

"Granted," said lawyer Page coldly, "but the castle of M. de Cambyse is surrounded by walls. Will these walls tumble, like those of Jericho, at the sound of cymbals and bass-drums? Suppose, however, that you take the Marquis' castle by assault. It will be a fine feat of arms, no doubt. But this exploit is not likely to win you the cross of Saint Louis. Where you see only a good joke and legitimate reprisals, justice will see a case of forcible entry, scaling of walls, infringement of domiciliary

peace, night attack, and all this against a Marquis, too. The least of these things is punishable by the galleys, I warn you. After your victory, therefore, you will be oblged to leave the country. And what for? Simply to force a Marquis to kiss you.

"When one can avenge himself without risk and damage to oneself, I am willing to admit vengeance. But to avenge oneself to one's own detriment is ridiculous, an act of folly. You, Benjamin, say that you have been insulted. But what is an insult? Almost always an act of brutality committed by the stronger to the prejudice of the weaker. Now how can another's brutality damage your honour? Is it your fault that this man is a miserable savage who knows no other right than might? Are you responsible for his cowardice? If a tile should fall on your head, would you run to break it into pieces? Would you think yourself insulted by a dog who had bitten you, and would you challenge him to a duel, like the strange duel of Montargis' poodle with his master's assassin? If the insult dishonours anyone, it is the insulter himself. All honest people are on the side of the insulted. When a butcher maltreats a sheep, are we indignant at the sheep? Eh?

"If the evil you wish to do to your insulter would cure you of that which he has done to you, I could understand your thirst for revenge. But if you are the weaker, you will bring down upon your-

self new acts of violence. If, on the contrary, you are the stronger, you will still have the trouble to fight your adversary. Thus the man who avenges himself always plays the rôle of a dupe. The precept of Jesus Christ which tells us to forgive those who have offended us is not only a fine moral precept, but also good, sensible advice. From all which I conclude that you will do well, my dear Benjamin, to forget the honour that the Marquis has done you, and to drink with us until night to drown the memory of it."

"I don't share cousin Page's opinion at all. It is always pleasant and sometimes useful honestly to return the evil that has been done us. It serves as a lesson to the wicked. Let them know that it is at their own risk and peril that they abandon themselves to their evil instincts. To let the viper that has bitten you escape when you might crush it, and to forgive the wicked, is the same thing. Generosity in such a case is not only stupidity, it is a wrong against society. Though Jesus Christ said, 'Forgive your enemies,' Saint Peter cut off Malchus's ear; which make things even."

My uncle was as obstinate as a donkey. For that matter obstinacy is an hereditary vice in our family. Nevertheless he agreed that lawyer Page was right.

"I believe, Monsieur Minxit," said he, "that the best thing for you to do is to put your sword back in the scabbard and your plumed hat in its box. War

should be made only for extremely serious causes, and the king who drags a part of his people unnecessarily to those vast slaughter-houses known as battle-fields is a murderer. Perhaps it would flatter you, Monsieur Minxit, to be enrolled among the heroes. But what is the glory of a general? Cities in ruins, villages in ashes, countries ravaged, women abandoned to the brutality of the soldiers, children led away captive, casks of wine in the cellars staved in. Have you not read Fénelon, Monsieur Minxit? All these things are atrocious. I shudder at the very thought of them."

"What are you talking about?" answered Monsieur Minxit, "this is a question only of a few blows of a pick-axe at some old crumbling walls."

"Well," said my uncle, "why take the trouble to knock them down when they are ready to fall of themselves? Please restore peace to this beautiful country. I should be a coward and a wretch if, in order to avenge an injury wholly personal to myself, I should let you expose yourself to the manifold dangers that our expedition would involve."

"But," said M. Minxit, "I have some personal injuries of my own to avenge on this country squire. He once mockingly sent me horse's urine instead of human urine for examination."

"A fine reason for risking six years in the galleys! No, Monsieur Minxit, posterity would not absolve you. If you will not think of yourself, think of your daughter, of your dear Arabella. What pleasure

would she take in making such good cream cheeses, if you were no longer here to eat them?"

This appeal to the paternal feelings of the old doctor had its effect.

"Promise me, at least," he said, "that justice shall be done to M. de Cambyse for his insolence. For you are my son-in-law, and from this time forth, where honour is concerned, we are as one man instead of two."

"Oh, rest easy as to that, Monsieur Minxit! I shall always have my eye trained for the Marquis. I shall watch him with the patient attention of a cat watching a mouse. Some day or other I shall catch him alone and without an escort. Then he will have to cross his noble sword with my rapier, or I shall cudgel him to my heart's content. I cannot swear, like the old knights, to let my beard grow or to eat hard bread until I have avenged myself, because the one is unbefitting our profession and the other is contrary to my temperament. But I swear to you that I will not become your son-in-law until the insult that has been offered me shall have been gloriously atoned for."

"No, no," answered M. Minxit, "you go too far, Benjamin. I do not accept this impious oath. On the contrary, you must marry my daughter. You can avenge yourself afterward as well as before."

"How can you think so, Monsieur Minxit? Since I must fight to the death with the Marquis, my life no longer belongs to me. I cannot think of marry-

ing your daughter, and perhaps leave her a widow the very day after her wedding."

The good doctor tried to shake my uncle's resolution, but seeing that he could not succeed, he decided to change his clothes and disband his army.

Thus ended this great expedition, which cost humanity little blood, but M. Minxit much wine.

CHAPTER X

HOW MY UNCLE MADE THE MARQUIS KISS HIM

BENJAMIN had passed the night at Corvol.

The next day, as he was leaving the house with M. Minxit, the first person they saw was Fata. Fata, who did not have a clear conscience, would rather have met two big wolves in his path than my uncle and M. Minxit. Still, as he could not run away, he decided to put the best face he could on the matter and walked up to my uncle.

"How do you do, Monsieur Rathery? How are you, honourable Monsieur Minxit? Well, Monsieur Benjamin, how did you get out of your difficulty with our Gessler? I was terribly afraid he might play you a mean trick. I did not sleep a wink the whole night."

"Fata," said M. Minxit, "keep your obsequiousness for the Marquis when you meet him. Is it true that you told M. de Cambyse that you don't want to know Benjamin any more?"

"I don't remember, my good Monsieur Minxit."

"And is it true that you told the Marquis that I was not a man to associate with?"

"I could not have said that, my dear Monsieur

Minxit. You know how much I esteem you, my friend."

"I declare on my honour that he said both," said my uncle, with the icy coldness of a judge.

"Very well," said M. Minxit, "then we will settle his account."

"Fata," said Benjamin, "I warn you that M. Minxit intends to flog you. Here is my switch. For the honour of the profession, defend yourself. A doctor cannot allow himself to be whipped like a donkey."

"The law is on my side," said Fata. "If he strikes me, every blow will cost him dear."

"I am willing to spend a thousand francs," said M. Minxit, making his whip whistle in the air. "Take this, *Fata fatorum,* Destiny, Providence of the ancients! And this, and this, and this, and this!"

The peasants came to their doorways to see Fata flogged. For, be it said to the shame of our poor humanity, nothing is so dramatic as to see a man ill-treated.

"Gentlemen," cried Fata, "I place myself under your protection."

But no one budged from his place. Owing to the esteem which M. Minxit enjoyed, he was looked upon as having in a way the right to administer petty justice in the village.

"Then," continued the unfortunate Fata, "I call on you as witnesses of the violence perpetrated on my person. I am a doctor of medicine."

"Wait," said M. Minxit, "I will strike harder, so that those who do not see the blows may hear them, and that you may have some scars to show the bailiff."

And he did indeed strike harder, ferocious plebeian that he was.

"Just you wait, Minxit," said Fata, as he went away, "you will have to deal with M. de Cambyse. He will not suffer me to be maltreated because I salute him."

"Tell Cambyse," said M. Minxit, "that I laugh him to scorn, that I have more men than he, that my house is more solid than his castle, and that if he wants to come to-morrow to the plateau of Fertiant with his people, I am his man."

To have done with this incident, let me say at once that Fata had M. Minxit cited before the bailiff to answer for the violence he had done him, but that he could not find a single witness to testify to the fact, although the thing had happened in the presence of a hundred people.

When my uncle reached Clamecy, his sister handed him a letter postmarked Paris, with the following contents:

MONSIEUR RATHERY:

I have learned on good authority that you intend to marry Mademoiselle Minxit. I expressly forbid you to do so.

VICOMTE DE PONT-CASSÉ.

My uncle sent Gaspard to fetch him a sheet of

royal writing paper, took Machecourt's ink-stand, and replied at once:

MONSIEUR VICOMTE:

You may go to . . .

Accept the assurance of the respectful sentiments with which I have the honour to be,

Your humble and devoted servant,

B. RATHERY.

Where did my uncle wish to send his vicomte? I don't know. I have made inquiries to penetrate the mystery of the words left unwritten. In vain. At any rate, I have given you an example of the firmness, precision, force and accuracy of his style when he took the trouble to write.

Meanwhile, my uncle had not abandoned his ideas of revenge. Quite the contrary. The following Friday, after visiting his patients, he sharpened his sword and put Machecourt's overcoat over his red coat. As he did not wish to sacrifice his queue and as he could not put it in his pocket, he hid it under his old wig, and, thus disguised, went to seek out his Marquis. He established his headquarters in a sort of tavern on the edge of the Clamecy road opposite the Marquis' castle. The host had just broken his leg. My uncle, always prompt to come to the aid of a neighbour who has broken a limb, declared himself a physician and offered the help of his art to the patient. The afflicted family permitted him to join the two fragments of the broken

shinbone; which he did quickly and to the great admiration of two tall lackeys in the livery of M. de Cambyse, who were drinking in the wine-shop.

When the operation was finished, my uncle took up his position in an upper chamber of the tavern, directly above the sign, and began to observe the castle with a spy-glass, which he had borrowed from M. Minxit. He had been waiting there a good hour without noticing anything to his purpose, when he saw a lackey of M. de Cambyse come running down the hill at full speed. The man stepped to the door of the tavern, and asked if the doctor was still there. Receiving an answer in the affirmative, he went up to my uncle's room, and, doffing his hat, begged him to come to the castle and attend M. de Cambyse, who had just swallowed a fish-bone. My uncle was at first tempted to refuse. But reflecting that this circumstance might favour his project of revenge, he decided to follow the domestic.

The lackey ushered him into the Marquis' chamber. M. de Cambyse was in his arm-chair, with his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on his knees. He seemed to be violently agitated. The Marquise, a pretty brunette of twenty-five, was standing beside him, trying to calm him. On the arrival of my uncle, the Marquis raised his head and said:

"I swallowed a fish-bone at dinner, which has stuck in my throat. I had heard that you were in

the village, and I sent for you, although I have not the honour of knowing you. I am sure you will not refuse me your aid."

"We owe that to everybody," answered my uncle, with icy coldness. "To the rich as well as to the poor, to noblemen as well as to peasants, to the wicked as well as to the just."

"This man frightens me," said the Marquis to his wife, "make him go away."

"But," said the Marquise, "you know very well that no doctor will venture into the castle. You have this one here, try to keep him at least."

The Marquis yielded to this advice. Benjamin examined the sick man's throat, and shook his head with an air of anxiety. The Marquise turned pale.

"What is the matter?" he said. "Can it be even more serious than we supposed?"

"I don't know what you supposed," answered Benjamin, in a solemn voice, "but it will be very serious indeed unless the right measures are taken immediately. You have swallowed a salmon bone, a bone from the tail, the place where it is most poisonous."

"That's true," said the astonished Marquise. "How did you find it out?"

"By inspection of the throat, Madame."

The fact is, he had found it out in a very simple way. On passing the open door of the dining-room, he had seen a salmon on the table, with only the tail

missing, from which he inferred that the swallowed fish-bone had come from the tail.

"We have never heard that salmon bones are poisonous," said the Marquise in a voice trembling with fright.

"That does not alter the fact that they are, and very much so," said Benjamin, "and I should be sorry to have Madame Marquise doubt it, for I should be obliged to contradict her. The bones of the salmon, like the leaves of the manchineel tree, contain a substance so bitter and corrosive that if this bone should remain a half-hour longer in the Marquis' throat, it would produce an inflammation which I could not subdue, and the operation would become impossible."

"In that case, doctor, operate directly, I beg of you," said the Marquis, getting more and more frightened.

"One moment," said my uncle. "The thing cannot move as fast as you would like. There is a little formality to be gone through first."

"Hurry up and go through it, then, and begin."

"It's something you have to do."

"Tell me what it is, surgeon of misfortune! Are you going to let me die of neglect?"

"I still hesitate," continued Benjamin, slowly and deliberatingly. "How shall I venture to make such a proposition to you? To a Marquis! To a man descended in direct line from Cambyse, king of Egypt!"

"You wretch, I believe you are taking advantage of my position to make fun of me," cried the Marquis, the violence of his character reasserting itself.

"Why no, not at all," answered Benjamin, coldly. "Do you remember a man that you ordered your menials to drag into your castle three months ago, because he did not salute you, and then you inflicted the most outrageous affront upon him that one man can inflict upon another?"

"A man I made—kiss me. Actually, you are the man. I recognise you by your five feet ten inches."

"Well, the man of the five feet ten inches, the man you looked upon as an insect, as a grain of dust, the man you would never meet except under your feet, that man now demands satisfaction of you for the insult you offered him."

"My God, I ask nothing better. Mention the sum at which you value your honour, and I will have it paid to you directly."

"So you think, Marquis de Cambyse, do you, that you are rich enough to reimburse the honour of an honourable man? Do you take me for a wretched clerk? Do you think I will allow myeslf to be insulted in return for money? No, no, it is satisfaction I want, satisfaction for the insult to my honour! Do you hear, Marquis de Cambyse?"

"Very well. I agree," said M. de Cambyse, whose eyes were fixed on the hands of the clock. In terror he saw the fatal half hour slipping by. "In the presence of the Marquise, I will declare, and in

writing, if you wish, that you are a man of honour and I did wrong to insult you."

"The devil! You get rid of your debts quickly! Do you think that when you have insulted an honourable man all you need do is admit you were wrong, and then everything is all right again? To-morrow you and your country squires would laugh at the simpleton who contented himself with a mere show of satisfaction. No, no, it is the penalty of eye for eye, tooth for tooth, that you must submit to. The weak man of yesterday is the strong man of to-day. The worm has turned into a snake. You won't escape my sentence, as you escaped the magistrate's. There is no protection that can defend you against me. I kissed you. You must kiss me."

"Have you forgotten, wretch, that I am the Marquis de Cambyse?"

"You forgot that I am Benjamin Rathery. An insult is like God. In its presence all men are equal. There is no Insulter the Great and no Insulted the Small."

"Lackeys," said the Marquis, who in his wrath forgot the supposed danger he was in, "take this man to the yard and have him given a hundred lashes. I want to hear him howl from here."

"Very well," said my uncle, "but in ten minutes it will be impossible to perform the operation, and in an hour you will be dead."

"Can't I send my messenger to Varzy for a surgeon?"

"If your footman finds the surgeon at home, he will bring him here just in time to see you die and come to the assistance of the Marquise."

"But you can't possibly remain inexorable," said the Marquise. "Isn't there more pleasure in forgiveness than in revenge?"

"Oh, Madame," replied Benjamin, bowing gracefully, "I assure you, had it been from you that I received such an insult, I should not have resented it."

Madame de Cambyse smiled. Realising there was nothing to be done with my uncle, she herself urged her husband to submit to necessity, and pointed out that he had but five minutes left in which to make up his mind.

The Marquis, subdued by fear, made a sign to the two lackeys who were in his room to retire.

"No," said the inflexible Benjamin, "that is not the way I mean. On the contrary, lackeys, you will go and notify the people of M. de Cambyse in his name that they are to come here. They were witnesses of the insult. They must be witnesses of the satisfaction. Madame the Marquise alone is permitted to retire."

The Marquis glanced at the clock and saw there were but three minutes left. As the lackey did not budge, he said:

"Hurry, Pierre. Carry out Monsieur's orders. Don't you see that he alone is master here at this moment?"

The domestics arrived one after another, all except the steward. Benjamin, unrelenting to the end, would not begin until he came in, too.

. . . . . .

"Good," said Benjamin, "now we are quits, and everything is forgotten. Now I will conscientiously attend to your throat."

He extracted the bone very quickly and very deftly, and placed it in the Marquis's hands, and while the Marquis was examining it curiously, he said:

"I must give you some fresh air."

He opened a window, swung himself down into the yard, and in two or three strides of his long legs was at the gate. While he hurried down the hillside, the Marquis stood at the window, shouting:

"Stop, Monsieur Benjamin Rathery. Please stop. Come back and receive my thanks and the Marquise's thanks. I must pay you for the operation."

But Benjamin was not a man to be trapped by such fine words. At the foot of the hill he met the Marquis's messenger.

"Landry," he said, "my compliments to the Marquise, and reassure M. de Cambyse in regard to salmon bones. They are no more poisonous than a pike's bones, only they should not be swallowed. He should keep warm compresses about his throat, and in two or three days he will be cured."

As soon as my uncle was off the Marquis's estate, he turned to the right, crossed the meadows of Flez

and the thousands of brooks that intersected them, and went to Corvol. He wanted first of all to regale old M. Minxit with the news of his exploit. He saw him from a distance standing in front of his door, and waved his handkerchief triumphantly and shouted:

"We are avenged."

The good old man ran to meet him as quickly as his short fat legs would carry him, and threw himself into his arms as tenderly as if he had been his son. My uncle said he even tried to hide two big tears that rolled down his cheeks. The old doctor, whose nature was no less proud and wrathful than Benjamin's, was beside himself with joy. On reaching the house he told the musicians to celebrate the glorious day by blowing the trumpets until night, and then he told them to get drunk—an order that was punctually executed.

CHAPTER XI

HOW MY UNCLE HELPED HIS TAILOR TO ATTACH HIS PROPERTY

NEVERTHELESS, Benjamin returned to Clamecy a little disturbed by the audacity of his exploit. But the next day the messenger from the castle brought him a note from his master and a considerable sum of money. The note read as follows:

The Marquis de Cambyse begs M. Benjamin Rathery to forget what passed between them, and in payment for the operation he so skilfully performed to accept this trifling sum.

"Oh," said my uncle, after reading this letter, "the good lord wants to pay me to hold my tongue. He is even honest enough to pay me in advance. A pity he does not treat all his trades-people the same way. Had I extracted the fish-bone simply, in the regular way without any fuss or ceremony, he would have pressed a six-franc piece into my hand and sent me to the kitchen for a bite. Moral: It is better to be feared than to be loved by the aristocrats. May God damn me if ever I depart from this principle!

"Nevertheless, since I have no intention of hold-

ing my tongue, I cannot conscientiously keep this money. If one is to be honest at all, one should be honest with everybody. But I'd like to see how much money is in this bag. I'd like to see how much he pays for the operation, and how much for me to hold my tongue. One hundred and fifty francs! Thunder! Cambyse comes down handsomely. To the thrasher who swings his flail from three o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night, he gives only twelve sous, and that without any guarantee that he won't also give the man a beating to boot. And he pays me one hundred and fifty francs for a quarter of an hour's work. I call that generosity.

"M. Minxit would have asked a hundred francs for the extraction of this bone. But he practises medicine on the grand orchestra and loud noise plan. He has four horses and twelve musicians to feed. For me, who have nothing to support but my case of instruments and my personage—a personage of five feet ten inches, to be sure—two pistoles is enough. So, taking twenty from one hundred and fifty, there are thirteen pistoles to go back to the Marquis. I almost feel remorse at taking any of his money. I'd pay a thousand francs myself—to be paid after my death, of course—rather than not have performed that operation for which I am taking twenty francs. That poor aristocrat, how small and pitiful he looked with his pale, beseeching face and the salmon-bone in his throat! How humbly

nobility in his person apologised to the people represented in my person! He would willingly have allowed me to fasten his escutcheon to his hind parts. If there was a portrait of one of his ancestors in the room at the time, his brow must still be red with shame. I should like the little spot he kissed me on to be separated from the rest of my body after my death, and transferred to the Pantheon, that is, of course, if the people have a Pantheon by that time.

"But, Marquis, that does not mean that you are to be let off this way. Before three days have expired, the entire bailiwick shall know of your adventure. I even intend to have it related to posterity by Millot-Rataut, our Christmas poet. All he need do is fill a dozen sheets with Alexandrines on the theme. As for these twenty francs, they are money found. They are not to pass through my dear sister's hands. To-morrow is Sunday. To-morrow, then, I shall give my friends a supper with this money such as I have never given them before, a supper for which I shall pay cash. They should know how a man of wit can avenge himself without recourse to his sword."

Having thus adjusted the matter, my uncle began to write to the Marquis notifying him of the return of the money. I should be delighted were I able to give my readers this specimen of my uncle's epistolary style. Unhappily, his letter is not to be found among the historical documents that my grand-

father kept for us. Perhaps my uncle the tobacco-merchant used it for a paper bag.

While Benjamin was writing, the maker of his red suits came in with a bill folded up in his hand.

"What's that?" said Benjamin, laying his pen on the table. "Your bill again, Monsieur Bonteint, forever your eternal bill? My God, you have presented it to me so many times that I know it by heart. Six yards of scarlet cloth, double width—isn't that so?—with ten yards of lining and three sets of carved buttons?"

"That's right, Monsieur Rathery, exactly right. A total of one hundred and fifty francs ten sous six deniers. May I be barred out of Paradise if I do not lose at least a hundred francs on this transaction!"

"If that is so," my uncle replied, "why waste your time smearing up all that ugly paper? You know I never have money, Monsieur Bonteint."

"On the contrary, Monsieur Rathery, I see you have some, and I see I came at exactly the right moment. There's a bag on the table which must hold just about the amount of my bill, and if you will permit me——"

"One moment," said my uncle, quickly laying his hand on the bag. "This money does not belong to me, Monsieur Bonteint. Here is the very letter of return that I have just written, which you made me blot. Here," he added, handing the letter to the merchant, "if you wish to read it."

"No use, Monsieur Rathery, absolutely no use. All I want to know is when you will have some money that belongs to you."

"Alas, M. Bonteint, who can foretell the future? I should very much like to know the same thing myself."

"In that case, Monsieur Rathery, you will not take it ill if I go directly to Parlanta and tell him to push my suit against you."

"You are out of sorts, my dear sir. On what kind of cloth have you been working to-day?"

"Out of sorts, Monsieur Rathery? Don't you think I have reason to be? For three years you have been owing me this money, and you put me off from month to month on the ground of some epidemic that has never come. It's on your account that Madame Bonteint quarrels with me every day. She finds fault with me for not knowing how to collect my bills, and sometimes she gets so furious that she treats me like a blockhead."

"Certainly a very amiable lady. You are fortunate, Monsieur Bonteint, in having such a wife, and I beg you to present my compliments to her as soon as possible."

"I thank you, Monsieur Rathery, but my wife is, as they say, something of a Greek. She prefers money to compliments, and she says, if you had had to deal with my rival Grophez, you would have been in the Hotel Boutron long ago."

"The devil take it!" cried my uncle, furious that

Bonteint was not making off. "It is your fault if I have not settled with you. All your rivals either have been or are sick. Dutorrent has had two attacks of pneumonia this year. Artichaut has had typhoid fever, Sergifer, rheumatism, and Ratine has had diarrhœa for six months. While you—you enjoy perfect health. I have had no opportunity of supplying you with medicine. Your face is as fresh as one of your pieces of nankeen, and Madame Bonteint looks like a statuette of fresh butter. You see I have been deceived. I thought you would be an honour to my clientèle. Had I known then what I know now, I would not have given you my custom."

"But, Monsieur Rathery, I can't see why either Madame Bonteint or myself are obliged to be ill so as to help you pay your debts."

"And I say, Monsieur Bonteint, that you are under that moral obligation. How would you manage to pay your bills if your customers did not wear coats? This obstinacy in keeping your health is an abominable procedure. It is a trap you set for me. At this moment your account-book ought to show that I owe you fifty crowns. So I will deduct one hundred and thirty francs ten sous six deniers from your bill for the maladies you ought to have had. You will admit that I am reasonable. You are very lucky to pay for the medicine without having had to call in a doctor. I know many people who would like to be in your place. So, then, if

from one hundred and fifty francs ten sous six deniers we take one hundred and thirty francs ten sous six deniers, there is a balance of twenty francs still due you. If you want them, here they are. I advise you as a friend to take them. So good an opportunity will not present itself soon again."

"On account," said M. Bonteint, "I will willingly take twenty francs on account."

"In final settlement," insisted my uncle. "Even so I need all my strength of soul to make this sacrifice. I had meant the money to be used for a bachelors' supper. I had even intended to invite you, though you are the father of a family."

"Some more of your poor jokes, Monsieur Rathery. That's all I can ever get out of you. You know very well I have a warrant drawn up for the seizure of your property, and I can have it enforced immediately."

"Exactly what I complain of, Monsieur Bonteint. You have no confidence in your friends. Why go to useless expense? Couldn't you come to me and say, 'Monsieur Rathery, it is my intention to have your property attached?' I would have answered, 'Attach it yourself, Monsieur Bonteint. You don't need a sheriff's officer for that.' I will even serve as a bailiff's man for you, if that is agreeable to you. Why not seize it now? Don't stand on ceremony. Everything I have is at your disposal. You may pack up, wrap up, and carry away anything you like."

"What, you would be good enough, Monsieur Rathery?"

"Why not, Monsieur Bonteint? I should be delighted to be arrested by your hands. I will even help you seize my things."

My uncle opened a tumble-down wardrobe that still had some copper fittings hanging from a nail inside. He drew out a drawer and removed two or three old queue ribbons, which he handed to M. Bonteint.

"You see, you won't lose everything. These articles will not count in the total. I throw them in."

"Umpf!" answered M. Bonteint.

"This red morocco portfolio is my case of instruments."

M. Bonteint was about to lay his hand on it.

"Softly," said Benjamin. "The law does not allow you to touch this. These are the tools of my profession, and I have a right to keep them."

"But——" said M. Bonteint.

"Here is a corkscrew with an ebony handle inlaid with silver," Benjamin said, putting it in his pocket. "I withdraw it from my creditors. I need it more than you do."

"If you keep everything you need more than I do, I shall certainly not need a cart to carry off my prize in."

"One moment," said my uncle, "you will lose nothing by waiting. Here on this shelf are some old medicine bottles, some of which are cracked.

I do not guarantee their integrity. I leave them to you with all the spiders that are in them. On this other shelf is a large stuffed vulture. It will cost you nothing but the trouble of taking it down, and it will do nicely as a sign for you."

"Monsieur Rathery!" said Bonteint.

"Here is Machecourt's wedding wig. I don't know how it happens to be here. I do not offer it to you, because I know all you wear is a toupee."

"What do you know about what I wear, Monsieur Rathery?" cried Bonteint, getting more and more irritated.

"Here in this bottle," continued my uncle, with imperturbable *sang-froid,* "is a tapeworm which I have preserved in alcohol. You can use it to make garters for yourself, Madame Bonteint, and your children. However, I call your attention to the fact that it would be a pity to mutilate this beautiful animal. You can boast of having the longest being in creation, not excepting the immense boa-constrictor. Estimate the rest at whatever you like."

"You are playing with me, Monsieur Rathery. These things have not the slightest value."

"I know it," said my uncle, coldly, "but then you have no bailiff's man to pay. Now here, for instance, is an article that alone is worth the entire amount of your bill. It is the stone I extracted two or three years ago from the mayor's bladder. You can have it carved into the shape of a snuff-box, put a band of gold about it, and add a few precious

stones, and it will make a very pretty birthday present for Madame Bonteint."

Bonteint, furious, started for the door.

"One moment," said my uncle, catching hold of his coat tail. "What a hurry you are in, Monsieur Bonteint. I have shown you only the least of my treasures. Here is an old engraving representing Hippocrates, the father of medicine. I guarantee it to be a perfect likeness. And here are three volumes of the *Medical Gazette,* which will make delightful entertainment for these long winter evenings."

"You're fooling again, Monsieur Rathery."

"My goodness, don't be angry, papa Bonteint. We have just reached the most valuable article."

My uncle opened an old closet and took out two red coats, which he threw at M. Bonteint's feet. A cloud of dust arose that made the good merchant cough, and a swarm of spiders scattered about the room.

"The last two coats you sold me. You deceived me outrageously, Monsieur Fauxteint. They faded in one morning like two rose leaves, and my dear sister could not even use them to colour the children's Easter eggs. You deserve to have a deduction made from your bill for this colour."

"Oh," cried Bonteint, horrified, "this is really too much. Never was a creditor treated more insolently. To-morrow morning you shall hear from me, Monsieur Rathery."

Bonteint at Rathery's
and how Rathery gives his Sister a
Calling down

"So much the better, Monsieur Bonteint. I shall always be delighted to learn that you are in good health. By the way, Monsieur Bonteint, you are forgetting your queue ribbons!"

As Bonteint went out, lawyer Page came in. He found my uncle shaking with laughter.

"What have you been doing to Bonteint?" he said. "I just met him on the stairs, red with anger. He was in such a fury that he did not even bow to me."

"The old imbecile is angry with me because I have no money. As if that ought not to bother me more than him!"

"You have no money, my poor Benjamin? Bad, doubly bad, because I came to offer you a wonderful bargain."

"Offer it just the same," said Benjamin.

"The vicar Djhiarcos wishes to get rid of a quarter-cask of Burgundy, a present from one of his pious parishioners. He has rheumatism, and Doctor Arnout has put him on a diet of tea, which promises to last a long time, and he is afraid his wine may spoil. He wants the money to furnish a home for a poor orphan who has just lost her last aunt. So it's both a good bargain and a good deed that I am proposing to you."

"All very well and good," said Benjamin, "but without money it is not so easy to do a good deed. Good deeds are expensive. It isn't everybody that can afford them. But what is your opinion of the wine?"

"Exquisite," said Page, smacking his lips. "He made me taste it. It is Beaune of the first quality."

"And how much does the virtuous Djhiarcos want for it?"

"Twenty-five francs."

"I have only twenty francs. If he wants to let it go for twenty francs, the sale is concluded. Then we will lunch on credit."

"His terms are twenty-five francs, take it or leave it. Twenty-five francs to save a poor orphan from poverty and preserve her from vice. You will admit that that is not too much."

"If you had five francs, Page, we could buy it together."

"Alas," said Page, "it is a good fortnight since I have seen a miserable six-franc piece. Cash seems to be afraid of M. de Calonne. It retires——"

"It is not always to be found with doctors," said my uncle. "So we must think no more of your quarter-cask."

For sole response, Page heaved a deep sigh.

At that moment my grandmother entered, carrying a big roll of linen in her arms, like an Infant Jesus. She placed it on my uncle's knees enthusiastically.

"Look, Benjamin," she said, "I have just got a superb bargain. I caught sight of this piece of goods this morning going around the fair. You need shirts, and I thought it would just suit you. Madame

Avril bid seventy-five francs for it, and she allowed the merchant to leave, but I could see from the way she eyed him that she intended to call him back. 'Let me see your linen,' I said to the peasant. I offered him eighty francs. I didn't think he would part with it for that. The linen is worth one hundred and twenty francs if it is worth a sou, and Madame Avril is furious with me for having interfered with her bargain."

"And this linen," cried my uncle, "you have bought it, you have bought it?"

"Yes," said my grandmother, who did not understand Benjamin's exasperation. "And there is no getting out of it. The peasant is downstairs waiting for his money."

"Well, go to the devil!" cried Benjamin, throwing the roll across the room, "you and—— That is, forgive me, my dear sister, forgive me, no—do not go to the devil. That's too far. But go carry the cloth back to the peasant. I have no money to pay for it."

"How about the money you received this morning from your client?" asked my grandmother.

"Lord, that money isn't mine. M. de Cambyse gave me too much."

"Too much? What do you mean?" answered my grandmother, looking at Benjamin in amazement.

"Yes, too much, my sister, too much, do you hear me, too much. He sent me fifty crowns for a

twenty-franc operation. Do you understand?"

"And you are stupid enough to send him back his money? If my husband were to play a trick like that on me!"

"Yes, I was stupid enough to send him back his money. What do you expect? Everybody cannot have the spirit you exact of Machecourt. I was stupid enough to send him back his money, and I don't repent it. I am not going to be a charlatan to please you. My God, my God! How hard it is to be an honest man in this world! Your nearest and your dearest are always the first to lead you into temptation."

"But you wretch, you need everything. You haven't a pair of silk stockings that are fit to wear, and when I mend your shirts on one side, they fall to pieces on the other."

"And because my shirts fall to pieces on one side when you mend them on the other, I am to be dishonest, my dear sister, am I?"

"But your creditors, when will you pay them?"

"When I have the money, that is all. I defy the richest man to do better."

"And what shall I tell the peasant?"

"Tell him whatever you like. Tell him I don't wear shirts, or I have three hundred dozen in my closet. Let him choose the one of the two reasons that suits him best."

"Oh, my poor Benjamin," said my grandmother,

M. Page

carrying off the linen, "with all your wit you will never be anything but an idiot."

"Really," said Page, when my grandmother was at the foot of the stairs, "your dear sister is right. You push honesty to the point of stupidity."

My uncle rose, full of fire, and grasped the lawyer's arm so hard in his iron hand that he cried out with the pain.

"Page, this is not a mere matter of honesty. It is noble and legitimate pride. It is respect not only for myself, but also for our poor oppressed class. Should I let this squire say he offered me a sort of tip and I accepted it? When their escutcheon is nothing but a beggar's badge, would you have them fling back at us the charge of beggary that we have so often made against them? Would you give them the right to say that we too receive alms when they are disposed to bestow them upon us? Listen, Page, you know whether or not I love Burgundy. You also know from what my dear sister just said whether or not I need shirts. But for all the vineyards of Côte-d'Or and all the hemp-fields of Pays-Bas, I would not want to have to turn my eyes aside from a single other person's eyes in the whole bailiwick. No, I wouldn't keep this money, not even to buy my life with. It is for us, men of heart and education, to do honour to these people among whom we were born. Through us they must learn that one does not have to be a noble to be a man, that they may rise through self-esteem from the degrada-

tion into which they have fallen, and that they may say to the handful of tyrants who oppress them, 'We are as good as you are, and more numerous. Why should we continue to be your slaves, and why should you wish to remain our masters?' Oh, Page, may I live to see that day, even if I have to drink poor wine the rest of my life!"

"All very fine," said Page, "but it won't give us Burgundy."

"Rest easy, drunkard, you will lose nothing. Sunday I am going to treat you all to supper with these twenty francs that I extracted from M. de Cambyse's throat, and at dessert I will tell you the whole story. I am going to write to M. Minxit directly. I cannot have Arthus, seeing that I have only twenty francs to spend, or else he will have to dine abundantly that day. But if you meet Rapin, Parlanta, and the others before I do, warn them not to make any other engagements."

I must say at once that this supper was postponed for a week because M. Minxit could not attend, and then was postponed indefinitely because my uncle was obliged to part with his two pistoles.

CHAPTER XII

HOW MY UNCLE HUNG M. SUSURRANS TO A HOOK IN HIS KITHCEN

BEHOLD the flowers, how wonderfully fertile they are. They scatter their seeds like rain. They throw them to the wind like dust, they send them without stint, like those alms that mount to dark attics, up to barren rocky peaks, among the old stones of tumbling walls, amid ruins that totter and fall, without troubling whether or not they will find a handful of earth to fertilise them, a drop of rain for their roots to suck, a ray of light to make them grow, and another ray to give them colour. The breezes of departing spring carry away the last perfumes of the meadows, and the earth is strewn with fading leaves; but when the autumn breezes come and shake their moist wings over the fields, another generation of flowers will have invested the earth with a new robe, and their feeble perfume will be the last breath of the dying year, which in dying smiles on us still.

In all other respects women are like flowers. But in the matter of fecundity they are not like flowers at all. Most women, ladies especially—and I beg

of you, my proletarian friends and brothers, to believe that I use this expression only to conform to custom; to me the truest lady is the woman who is the prettiest and the most charming—ladies, I say, bear children no longer. They become mothers of families as seldom as possible. They keep from having children for economy's sake. When the clerk's wife has produced her little clerk and the notary's wife her little notary, they believe they have fulfilled their obligation to the human race, and abdicate. Napoleon, who had a passion for conscripts, said the woman he liked best was the woman who had the most children. Easy for Napoleon to say when he had kingdoms instead of estates to pass on to his children.

The fact is, children are very expensive, an expense not within everybody's reach. The poor man alone can permit himself the luxury of a numerous family. Are you aware that the months required for nursing a child alone cost almost as much as a cashmere dress? Besides, the baby grows fast. The swollen boarding-school accounts and bills begin to come in, the shoemaker's bills and the tailor's. The infant of to-day will be a man to-morrow. His moustache appears, and there he is a bachelor of letters. Now you don't know what to do with him. So, to get rid of him you buy him a fine profession. But you are not slow to perceive from the drafts made on you from the four corners of the city that the profession brings your doctor nothing but invi-

tations and visiting cards. You must keep him till he is past the age of thirty in kid gloves, Havana cigars, and mistresses. Very disagreeable, you will admit. If there were a home for young people of twenty, as there is or, rather, no longer is, for infants, I assure you it would be crowded.

But in my uncle Benjamin's time things were very different. It was the golden age of midwives. Women gave themselves up to their instincts without worry or thought of the consequences. They all had children, rich and poor alike, even those who had no right to have them. But in those days they knew what to do with the children. Competition, that ogre with the steel fangs which devours so many little people, had not arrived yet. There was a place for everybody in the beautiful sunshine of France, and elbow room in every profession. Positions presented themselves to men capable of filling them like fruit hanging from the branch. Even the fools found situations, each according to the specialty of his folly. Glory was as easily achieved, as accommodating a maid, as fortune. It did not take half the wit it does now to be a man of letters; a dozen Alexandrines made a poet. I do not say I regret the loss of that blind fertility of old which produced like a machine without knowing what it did. I find I have enough neighbours as it is. I simply wish to make you understand how it was that at the period of which I speak my grand-

mother, although not yet thirty years old, was already at her seventh child.

My uncle absolutely insisted on his dear sister's being present at his wedding, and he made M. Minxit consent to postpone the event until after my grandmother's churching. The wardrobe of the newcomer was all white and embroidered, and his entrance into existence was expected daily. The six other children were all living, and all delighted to be in the world. Sometimes one of them was out of shoes, another one out of a cap. This one had holes at his elbows, and that one was run down at the heels. But they had their daily bread and their white starched shirts on Sundays, and in short kept wonderfully well and blooming in their rags.

My father, the eldest child, was the handsomest of the six and the best equipped with clothes. That may have been due to the fact that my uncle Benjamin passed on to him his old knee-breeches. They scarcely needed any alteration and often no alteration at all to make them over into pantaloons for Gaspard. Through cousin Guillaumot, who was sexton, Gaspard was promoted to the dignity of choir boy, and, I say it with pride, one of the best choir boys in the diocese. Had he stuck to the career that cousin Guillaumot started him on, he would have made a magnificent priest, instead of the handsome captain of a fire company that he is to-day. It is true I should still be sleeping in the void, as the good M. de Lamartine says, who himself goes to sleep

sometimes. But sleep is an excellent thing. Besides, to be the editor of a country newspaper and the antagonist of the department of public intelligence, is that worth the trouble of living?

However that may be, his Levitical functions brought my father a superb sky-blue suit. This is how the good fortune befell him. The banner of Saint Martin, patron saint of Clamecy, had been discarded. My grandmother, with that eagle eye of hers, discovered in this holy stuff the wherewithal to make her eldest son a jacket and a pair of pantaloons, and succeeded in securing the cast-off banner from the church treasury at a ridiculous price. The saint was painted in the very middle, represented in the act of cutting off an end of his cloak with his sabre to cover the nakedness of a beggar. That was no obstacle to my grandmother's plan. She turned the material, and Saint Martin came on the inside; which doubtless did not trouble the saint.

The coat was finished off by a seamstress in the Rue des Moulins. It would have fitted my uncle Benjamin, perhaps, quite as well as my father. My grandmother had had it made with enough goods to make it over for the second son after the first son had worn it out. At first my father paraded his sky-blue coat. I even believe he contributed to pay for the making out of his wages. But he was not slow to find out that a magnificent robe is often a garment of sack-cloth. Benjamin, to whom nothing was sacred, nicknamed him the patron saint of

Clamecy. The children picked up the nickname, and it cost my father many a blow. More than once he came home with a piece of the sky-blue coat in his pocket. Saint Martin became his personal enemy. He was often to be seen at the foot of the altar plunged in gloomy meditation. Of what was he dreaming? Of how to get rid of his coat. And one day, while the priest was saying the *Dominus vobiscum,* he responded, thinking he was talking to his mother:

"I tell you, I will never wear your sky-blue coat again."

It was while my father was in this state of mind that my uncle, the Sunday after high mass, suggested his going along with him to Val-des-Rosiers, where he had a visit to pay. Gaspard preferred playing with corks in the street to serving as aid to my uncle and answered he could not because he had a baptism to attend.

"That doesn't matter," said Benjamin. "Somebody else will take your place."

"Yes, but I must go to catechism at one o'clock."

"I thought you had had your first communion."

"I came near having it, but you yourself prevented me by making me get drunk the night before the ceremony."

"Why did you get drunk?"

"Because you were drunk yourself and threatened to beat me with the flat of your sword if I did not get drunk too."

"I was wrong," said Benjamin. "All the same you risk nothing by coming along with me. I shall be only a moment. We will return before catechism."

"Of course!" answered Gaspard. "When it would take someone else only an hour, it takes you half a day. You stop at all the taverns, and the priest forbade me to go with you because you set me a bad example."

"Well, pious Gaspard, if you refuse to come with me, I will not invite you to my wedding. But if you do me this favour, I will give you twelve sous."

"Give them to me now," said Gaspard.

"Why must you have them immediately, you scamp? Do you doubt my word?"

"No, but I am not anxious to be your creditor. I have heard it said in the village that you never pay anybody, and there's no use seizing your effects because your effects are not worth thirty sous."

"Well said, Gaspard. Here are fifteen sous, go tell my dear sister you are coming along with me."

My grandmother went all the way to the door with Gaspard admonishing him to be very careful with his coat, as he must keep it for his uncle's wedding.

"Are you joking?" said Benjamin. "Is there any need of telling a French choir boy to be careful with the banner of his patron saint?"

"Uncle," said Gaspard, "before we start I warn you that if you call me banner-bearer again, or blue

bird, or patron saint of Clamecy, I will run away with your fifteen sous, and go back to play corks."

On entering the village my uncle met M. Susurrans, the grocer, a very short, very thin little man, who seemed to be made out of charcoal and saltpetre, like gunpowder. M. Susurrans had a sort of small farm at Val-des-Rosiers. He was on his way back to Clamecy, carrying under his arm a keg that he hoped to smuggle in, and at the end of his cane a pair of capons that Madame Susurrans was waiting for to put on the spit. M. Susurrans knew my uncle and esteemed him, for Benjamin bought the sugar of him with which he sweetened his drugs and the powder he put on his queue. So M. Susurrans asked him to come to the farm and take some refreshment. My uncle, whose normal condition was thirst, accepted without ceremony. The grocer and his customer established themselves at the corner of the fire, each on a stool. They placed the keg between them. But they did not allow its contents to turn sour, and when it was not in the hands of one, it was at the lips of the other.

"Appetite comes by drinking as well as by eating. Suppose we eat the chickens?" said M. Susurrans.

"Right you are," answered my uncle, "it will save you the trouble of carrying them home. I don't understand how you could ever have thought of loading yourself down with such a burden."

"And what sauce shall we eat them with?"

"With that which can be made the quickest," said

Rathery, Susurrans
and Gaspard at the Junket and how Rathery
justifies himself before
Mme. Susurrans

Benjamin. "Here is an excellent fire to roast them on, too."

"Yes," said M. Susurrans, "but there are no kitchen utensils here except for making an onion soup. We have no spit."

Benjamin, like all great men, was never caught unprepared in any situation.

"It shall never be said," he answered, "that two intelligent men like ourselves were unable to eat a roasted fowl for want of a spit. If you take my advice, we will spit our chickens on the blade of my sword, and Gaspard here will turn them over the fire."

You would never have thought of this expedient, dear reader, but my uncle had imagination enough for ten present-day novelists.

Gaspard, who did not often get chicken to eat, went at his task with a will, and in an hour's time the fowls were roasted to a turn. They set a wash-tub upside-down before the fire for a table, and so did not have to leave their seats. They had no glasses, but the keg was not left idle on that account. They drank out of the bunghole, as in the days of Homer. It was not very convenient, but my uncle was such a stoic that he would rather drink good wine that way than bad wine out of crystal glasses. In spite of the various difficulties that the operation involved, the chickens were soon despatched. For some time the unfortunate birds had been nothing more than bare skeletons and still the two friends

kept on drinking. M. Susurrans, a very small man, as we have said, whose stomach and brain almost touched each other, was as drunk as one can be. But Benjamin, the tall Benjamin, had preserved the major part of his reason, and looked on his weaker adversary with pity. As for Gaspard, to whom they had occasionally passed the keg, he went a little beyond the limits of temperance. Filial respect does not allow me to use another expression.

Such was the spiritual situation of the party when they left the wash-tub. It was then four o'clock, and they began to get ready to start. M. Susurrans remembered he was to carry some chickens home to his wife and looked about for them to put them on the end of his cane, and asked my uncle if he had not seen them.

"Your chickens?" said Benjamin. "Are you joking? You have just eaten them."

"Yes, you old fool," added Gaspard, "you have eaten them. They were spitted on my uncle's sword, and I turned the spit."

"It's not true," cried M. Susurrans. "If I had eaten my chickens, I should not have such an appetite, and I am hungry enough to devour a wolf."

"I don't deny it," replied my uncle, "but it is none the less true that you have eaten your chickens. If you doubt it, here are the bones of both of them. You can hang them to the end of your cane if you like."

"You are lying, Benjamin. I don't recognise them

as the bones of my chickens. It's you who have taken them from me, and you shall return them to me."

"Very well," said my uncle, "send to look for them at my house to-morrow, and I'll return them to you."

"You shall return them to me at once," said M. Susurrans, rising on tip-toe to grab my uncle by the throat.

"Now, now, papa Susurrans!" said Benjamin. "If you are joking, I warn you that you are carrying the joke too far, and——"

"No, you wretch, I am not joking," said M. Susurrans, planting himself in front of the door. "You shall not leave here, neither you nor your nephew, till you have given me back my chickens."

"Uncle," said Gaspard, "would you like me to trip up the old imbecile?"

"Never mind, Gaspard, never mind, my friend," said Benjamin. "You are a churchman, and it is not seemly for you to to be mixed up in a quarrel. Now, then, M. Susurrans, one, two, will you let us out?"

"When you have given me my chickens back again," answered M. Susurrans, making a half turn to the left and thrusting his cane at my uncle like a bayonet.

Benjamin caught the cane, lowered it, took the little man by the middle of the body, and hung him

by the waistband to an iron rod over the door used to hang kitchen utensils on.

Susurrans, hanging like a saucepan, behaved like a beetle pinned to the floor. He screamed and kicked and cried "Fire! Murder!"

My uncle caught sight of a Liège almanac lying on the mantel-shelf.

"Here, Monsieur Susurrans. Cicero says study is a consolation in all situations in life. Content yourself with studying this book until someone comes to take you down. For I have no time to carry on a conversation with you, and I have the honour to wish you good evening."

My uncle had gone only twenty steps when he met the farmer, who came running at full speed and asked why his master was crying "Fire! Murder!"

"The house is probably burning and someone is trying to kill your master," answered my uncle with perfect composure. He whistled to Gaspard, who was lingering behind, and continued on his way.

The weather had grown milder. The sky, shortly before so bright, had turned drab-colour, like a plaster ceiling before it dries. A fine, close, piercing rain was falling and streamed in little drops from the stripped branches, making the trees and bushes look as though they were crying.

My uncle's hat soaked up the rain like a sponge, and soon its two corners became two spouts from which black water poured upon his shoulders. Concerned for his coat, he turned it inside out, and re-

membering his sister's injunction, ordered Gaspard to do the same. Gaspard heeded the injunction, forgetting Saint Martin.

A little farther on, Benjamin and Gaspard met a troop of peasants returning from vespers. At sight of the saint on Gaspard's coat, head downmost and all four of his horse's hoofs in the air, as if he had fallen down from the sky, the peasants burst out laughing and making fun. You know my uncle well enough to know he would not allow fellows like that to make sport of him with impunity. He drew his sword, while Gaspard armed himself with stones and led the attack, carried away by his ardour. Then my uncle saw that Saint Martin was the only one to blame, and he was seized with such a fit of laughter that he was obliged to lean on his sword to keep from falling.

"Gaspard," he cried, in a choking voice, "patron saint of Clamecy, your saint is upside down, your saint is losing his helmet."

Gaspard, seeing he was the object of all this mirth, could not endure the humiliation. He tore off his coat, threw it on the ground, and trampled on it. When my uncle had finished laughing, he tried to make him pick it up and put it on again. But Gaspard dashed off across the fields, and was seen no more. Benjamin picked up the coat in pity and put it on the end of his sword.

In the meantime M. Susurrans had come up. He had sobered off a little and now remembered

quite distinctly that he had eaten his chickens up. But he had lost his three-cornered hat. Benjamin, who was much amused by the little man's outbursts of anger and liked to see him get heated up, maintained he had eaten his hat. Susurrans had acquired such respect for Benjamin's physical strength that he did not dare take offence. He even was so contrary as to apologise to my uncle.

Benjamin and M. Susurrans returned to Clamecy together. At the otuskirts of the town they met lawyer Page.

"Where are you going?" he asked my uncle.

"You might imagine. I am going to my dear sister's for supper."

"No, you are not," said Page. "You are going to have supper with me at the Hotel du Dauphin."

"And if I should accept, to what circumstance would I owe the privilege?"

"I will explain in a word. A wealthy lumber merchant of Paris, for whom I won an important case, has invited me to dine with his attorney, whom he does not know. It is carnival time. So I decided you were to be his attorney, and I was on my way to tell you. It is an adventure worthy of us, Benjamin, and I feel sure I did not overestimate your passion for merry pranks when I counted on your doing this."

"A well-conceived masquerade, I am sure," said Benjamin. "But I don't know," he added, laugh-

ing, "whether honour and delicacy will permit me to play the part of the attorney."

"At table," said Page, "the most honourable man is the man who most conscientiously empties his glass."

"True, but suppose your lumber merchant should talk to me about his case?"

"I will answer for you."

"And suppose he should take it into his head to pay a visit to his attorney to-morrow?"

"I will bring him to you."

"All very fine, but I don't look like an attorney, at least so I flatter myself."

"You'll succeed in making your looks fit. You once passed yourself off for the Wandering Jew."

"And my red coat?"

"The man is a gull from Paris. We'll tell him that in the provinces attorneys wear red coats."

"And my sword?"

"If he notices it, tell him you use it to cut your pens with."

"But who actually is your lumberman's attorney?"

"Dulciter. You won't be so inhuman as to let me dine with Dulciter?"

"I know Dulciter isn't very entertaining, but if ever he finds out that I dined in his place, he would sue me for damages."

"I will defend you in court. Come, I am sure dinner is ready. But wait a moment! Our host asked me to bring Dulciter's head clerk along.

Where the devil am I to find a clerk for Dulciter?"

Benjamin ha-ha'd and clapped his hands.

"I have it! Here," he said, putting his hand on M. Susurrans' shoulder, "here is your clerk."

"Bosh," said Page, "a green-grocer?"

"What difference does that make?"

"He smells of cheese."

"You are not a connoisseur, Page. He smells of candles."

"But he is sixty years old."

"We will introduce him as the elder of the guild of clerks."

"You are knaves, blackguards!" said M. Susurrans in a fury. "I am not a bandit! I am not a fellow who runs from tavern to tavern."

"No," interrupted my uncle. "He gets drunk by himself in his cellar."

"Possibly, Monsieur Rathery. At any rate I don't get drunk at other people's expense, and I won't have anything to do with your rascalities."

"But you will this evening," said my uncle. "If you don't I'll tell everybody where I hung you."

"Where did you hang him?" asked Page.

"Guess——" said Benjamin.

"Monsieur Rathery!" cried Susurrans, putting his finger on his mouth.

"Well, are you ready to come along with us?"

"But, Monsieur Rathery, my wife is waiting for me. They will think me dead, murdered. They

will search for me along the road as far as Val-des-Rosiers."

"So much the better. Perhaps they'll find your hat."

"Monsieur Rathery, my good Monsieur Rathery!" pleaded Susurrans, clasping his hands.

"Now, now," said my uncle, "don't be so childish! You owe me satisfaction, and I owe you a dinner. At one stroke we shall be quits."

"At least let me go tell my wife."

"No," said Benjamin, placing himself between him and Page. "I know Madame Susurrans from behind her counter. She would lock you in and turn the key twice, and I don't want you to escape us. I wouldn't give you up for ten pistoles."

"And my keg," said Susurrans, "what am I to do with my keg now that I am an attorney's clerk?"

"You're right," said Benjamin, "you cannot present yourself to our client with a keg."

They were then in the middle of the Beuvron bridge. My uncle took the keg from the hands of Susurrans and threw it into the river.

"Rathery, you rascal! Rathery, you scoundrel!" cried Susurrans. "You shall pay me for my keg. Six francs it cost me. You shall find out what it will cost you."

"M. Susurrans," said Benjamin, assuming a lofty mien, "let us follow the example of the sage who said, *Omnia mecum porto,* that is, everything that is a burden to me I throw into the river. See, here

at the end of my sword is a magnificent coat, my nephew's Sunday coat, a museum piece. The making of it alone costs thirty times as much as your miserable keg. Well, I sacrifice it without the slightest regret. Throw it over the bridge, and we shall be quits."

M. Susurrans objecting, Benjamin himself threw the coat over the bridge, then took Page and Susurrans each by the arm, and said:

"Now let us be off. Raise the curtain. The play is on."

But man proposes and God disposes. As they were going up the steps of Vieille-Rome, they met Madame Susurrans face to face. As her husband had not yet returned, she had started out to meet him with a lantern. When she caught sight of him between my uncle and lawyer Page, both men of a suspicious reputation, her anxiety turned into anger.

"At last, here you are!" she cried. "How fortunate! I was beginning to think you were not coming home at all to-night. A nice life you are leading! A fine example to your son!"

Then, looking at her husband closer, she saw he was empty-handed and hatless.

"Where are your chickens, Monsieur! And your hat, wretch! And your keg, drunkard! What have you done with them?"

"Madame," responded Benjamin, gravely, "we ate the chickens, and as for his hat, he had the misfortune to lose it on the way."

"What, the monster lost his hat! A freshly-blocked hat!"

"Yes, Madame, he lost it, and he is to be congratulated, considering the position he was in, that he didn't lose his wig, too. As for the keg, the customs officials seized it, and have reported the offence."

Page could not help laughing, and Mme. Susurrans said:

"I see. You made my husband drunk, and are now making fun of us into the bargain. You would do better, Monsieur Rathery, attending to your patients and paying your debts."

"Do I owe you anything, Madame?" replied my uncle, proudly.

"Yes, my dear," broke in Susurrans, feeling strong under his wife's protection, "he made me get drunk, and he and his nephew ate my chickens. They took away my hat and threw my keg into the river, and now the blackguard wants to force me to dine with him at the Dauphin and, at my age, play the part of an attorney's clerk."

"That will do! I will go directly and tell M. Dulciter that you intend to take his and his clerk's place at dinner."

"You see, Madame," said my uncle, "your husband is drunk. He doesn't know what he is talking about. If you take my advice, put him to bed the minute you reach home, and give him some camomile tea every two hours. While holding him up before,

I had the chance to feel his pulse, and I assure you, he is not at all well."

"Oh, you rascal, you blackguard, you revolutionist! You dare to tell my wife I am sick from having drunk too much, while you yourself are drunk! Wait, I am going to Dulciter's this instant, and you will hear from him directly."

"Madame," said Page, with the utmost *sang-froid,* "you can't help seeing that this man is talking wildly. You would be untrue to your wifely duties if you would not make your husband take camomile tea, according to M. Rathery's prescription. He certainly is the most skilful doctor in the bailiwick, and he rewards this madman for his insults by saving his life."

Susurrans was about to renew his asseverations.

"That will do," his wife said to him, "I see these gentlemen are right. You are so drunk you cannot talk properly. Come with me right off, or I will lock you out, and you may sleep wherever you can."

"That's right," said Page and my uncle simultaneously, and they were still laughing when they reached the Dauphin. The first person they met in the yard was M. Minxit, who was just mounting his horse ready to return to Corvol.

"By God," said my uncle, seizing his horse's bridle, "you shall not go home to-night, Monsieur Minxit. You are going to dine with us. We have lost one table companion, but you are worth thirty of him."

"If it pleases you, Benjamin. Hostler, take my horse back to the stable, and tell them to keep a bed for me."

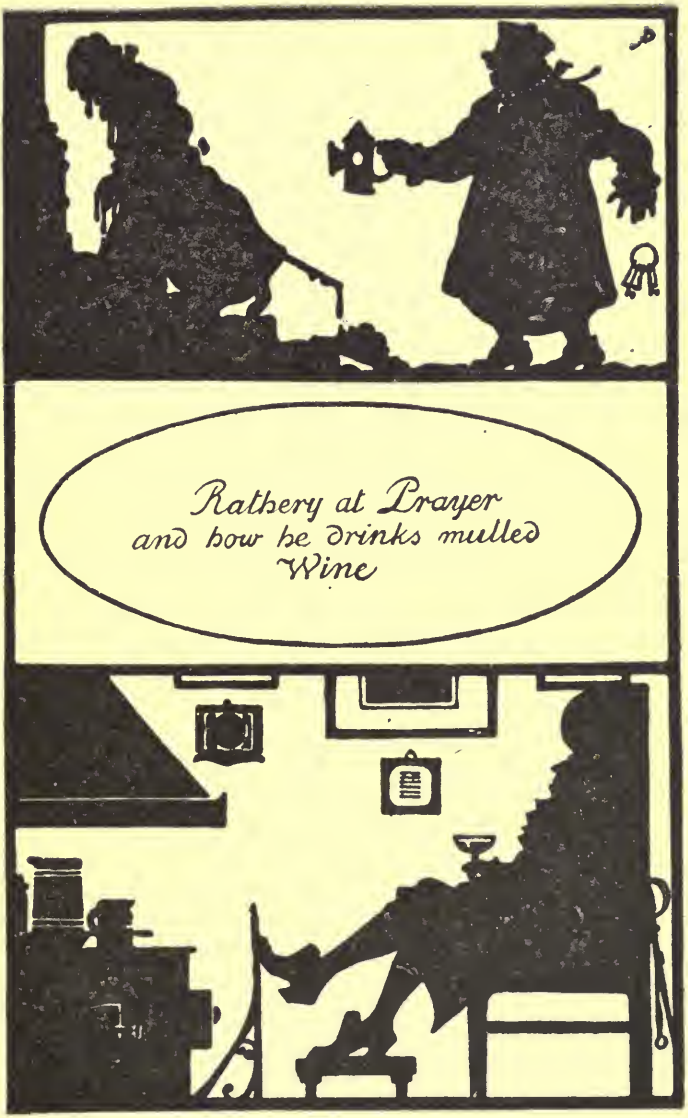
CHAPTER XIII

HOW MY UNCLE SPENT THE NIGHT IN PRAYER FOR HIS SISTER'S SAFE DELIVERY

My time is precious, dear readers, and I suppose yours is, too. So I shall not amuse myself by describing this memorable supper. You know the guests well enough to form an idea of how things went.

My uncle left the Hotel du Dauphin at midnight, advancing three steps and retreating two, like some pilgrims of old who vowed to go to Jerusalem at that pace. On entering the house, he saw a light in Machecourt's room, and thinking that his brother-in-law was scribbling off some writ, he went in to bid him good-night. My grandmother was in the pains of child-birth. The midwife, frightened at my uncle's unexpected appearance at that hour, went to notify him officially of the event that was about to take place. Benjamin remembered through the mists that obscured his brain that in the first year of her marriage his sister had had a very painful delivery which endangered her life. Immediately he dissolved in a flood of tears.

"Alas," he cried, in a voice loud enough to waken


Rathery at Prayer
and how he drinks mulled
Wine

the entire Rue des Moulins, "my dear sister is going to die. Alas! She is going to——"

"Madame Lalande," cried my grandmother from her bed, "put that drunken dog out."

"Please go out, Monsieur Rathery," said Madame Lalande. "There is not the slightest danger. The child is coming head first, and in an hour your sister will be delivered."

But Benjamin kept on crying, "Alas, my dear sister is going to die."

Machecourt, seeing the midwife's remarks had had no effect, thought it his duty to intervene.

"Yes, Benjamin, my friend, my brother, the child is coming head first. Do me the favour and go to bed, please."

So spoke my grandfather.

"And you, Machecourt, my friend, my brother," answered my uncle, "please, do me the favour and go——"

My grandmother, realising she could not count on Machecourt to take any determined step with Benjamin, decided to put him out doors herself.

With lamblike docility my uncle suffered himself to be pushed outside. His mind was soon made up. He would spend the night with Page, who was snoring like a blacksmith's bellows on one of the tables at the Dauphin. But in passing the church, it occurred to him to pray to God for his dear sister's safe delivery. The weather had grown very cold again, and the temperature was five or six degrees

below freezing point. Paying no attention to the cold, Benjamin knelt on the church steps, folded his hands as he had seen them do at his dear sister's, and began to murmur fragments of prayers. On beginning his second *Ave,* sleep overcame him, and he began to snore like his friend Page.

The next morning at five o'clock, when the sexton came to ring the Angelus, he saw something like a human form on its knees. At first, in his simplicity, he thought it was a saint who had left his niche to do penance. And he was about to carry him back into the church when by the light of his lantern, on coming nearer, he saw it was my uncle with an inch of ice on his back and an icicle half a yard long hanging from his nose.

"Hello, Monsieur Rathery! Hello!" he shouted in Benjamin's ear.

My uncle did not answer, and the sexton proceeded calmly to ring the Angelus. It was not until he had quite finished that he returned to M. Rathery. In case there should still be some life left, he lifted him to his shoulders like a sack and carried him to his sister's. My grandmother had already been delivered two good hours, so the neighbours who had spent the night with her could turn their attention to Benjamin. They placed him on a mattress before the hearth, wrapped him in warm coverings, and put a hot brick at his feet. In their zeal, they would have prepared to put him in the oven. Gradually my uncle thawed out. His queue,

which had been as stiff as his sword, began to weep on the bolster, his joints relaxed, his speech returned and the first use he made of it was to call for mulled wine. They quickly made him a whole kettleful. When he had drunk half of it, he fell into such a sweat that they thought he was going to turn into fluid. He swallowed the rest of the mulled wine, went to sleep again, and at eight o'clock in the morning was fresh and well. Had the priest made an official report of these facts, my uncle would surely have been canonised. They probably would have made him patron saint of the hosts of the inns. And, without flattering him, he would certainly have made a magnificent sign for an inn, with his queue and his red coat.

More than a week had passed since my grandmother's delivery, and she was already thinking of her churching. This sort of quarantine imposed by the canons of the church resulted in serious inconveniences to the whole family in general, and to her in particular. In the first place, when any important event, a shocking bit of scandal, for instance, ruffled the smooth surface of the neighbourhood, she could not gossip with her neighbours in the Rue des Moulins, which was a cruel privation. Moreover, she was obliged to send Gaspard to the market and the butchers wrapped in a kitchen-apron, and Gaspard either lost the money playing corks, or brought home a piece of neck instead of a leg. Or, if he was sent for a cabbage for the soup,

he did not return until after the soup had been made with something else. Benjamin would laugh, Machecourt would swear, and my grandmother would give Gaspard a whipping.

One day, irritated because he had to eat a calf's head without onions on account of Gaspard's tardiness, my grandfather said to my grandmother:

"Why don't you do the marketing yourself?"

"Why! Why!" replied my grandmother. "Because I cannot go to mass until Mme. Lalande has been paid."

"Why the devil, dear sister, didn't you wait with your confinement till you had some money?"

"Ask your simpleton brother-in-law why he has not brought me a miserable six-franc piece for a month."

"That is to say, if you were not to get any money for six months, you would remain shut up at home as in quarantine for that length of time?" asked Benjamin.

"Of course," replied my grandmother, "because if I were to go out before having been to mass, the priest would talk against me from the pulpit and the people would point their fingers at me in the streets."

"Then tell the priest to send you his housekeeper to keep house for you. God is too just to require Machecourt to eat calf's head without onions simply because you presented him with a seventh child."

Fortunately that six-franc piece so ardently

craved came in the company of a few others, and my grandmother was able to go to mass.

On returning home with Mme. Lalande, she found my uncle stretched out in Machecourt's leather armchair, his heels resting on the andirons and a bowl of mulled wine next to him. For I must tell you that ever since his recovery, Benjamin, out of gratitude to the mulled wine that had saved his life, took enough of it every morning to satisfy two sea captains. To justify this additional feat, he maintained that his temperature was still below zero.

"Benjamin," my grandmother said to him, "you must do me a favour."

"A favour! What can I do to please you, dear sister?"

"Can't you guess, Benjamin? You must be the baby's godfather."

Benjamin, who had not guessed it at all, but, on the contrary, was taken entirely unawares, shook his head and emitted a prolonged "But——"

"What," said my grandmother, her eyes flashing, "you don't mean to refuse?"

"Not at all, dear sister, not at all, but——"

"But what? Your eternal buts make me impatient."

"Well, you see, I have never been a godfather, and I really shouldn't know what to do."

"A tremendous difficulty! You will be told what to do. I will ask cousin Guillaumot to give you some lessons."

"I have the utmost faith in cousin Guillaumot's talents and zeal; but I fear the science of being a godfather is not suited to my intelligence. You will do better to take a godfather already endowed with the requisite knowledge. There's Gaspard, for instance. He's a choir boy and would suit perfectly."

"Come, Monsieur Rathery," said Madame Lalande, "you ought to accept your sister's invitation. It is a family duty."

"I see, Madame Lalande," said Benjamin. "Though I am not rich, I have the reputation of doing things well, and you would rather deal with me than with Gaspard. Isn't that so?"

"Oh, fie, Benjamin. Oh, fie, Monsieur Rathery," exclaimed my grandmother and Madame Lalande simultaneously.

"See here, my dear sister, frankly I have absolutely no desire to be a godfather. I will gladly act toward my nephew as if I had held him over the baptismal font. I will listen with satisfaction to the annual congratulations that he will extend to me on my birthday, and I promise to think them beautiful even if they have been composed by Millot-Rataut. I will let him kiss me every New Year's Day, and I will give him either a jumping Jack or a pair of breeches, whichever you prefer. I shall even feel flattered if you name him Benjamin. But to go plant myself like a great simpleton in front of the baptismal font and hold a candle in my hand—oh,

no, dear sister, you mustn't ask it of me. It goes against my manly dignity. I should be afraid that Djhiarcos would laugh in my face. Besides, how can I guarantee that the squealing youngster will renounce Satan and his works? Who will prove to me that he will renounce Satan and his works? If the godfather's responsibility is a mere sham, as some think, what's a godfather for? What's a godmother for? What are two securities for instead of one? Why need my signature be endorsed by another? But if the responsibility is a serious one, then why should I incur the consequences? Our soul is our most precious possession. Then isn't it crazy to pledge it for someone else's soul? Besides, why are you in such a hurry to have the poor little worm baptised? Is he a *paté de foie gras* or a Mayence ham which would spoil if it were not salted without delay? Wait until he is twenty-five. Then he will at least be able to answer for himself, and if he needs a security I shall know what I have to do. Until he is eighteen, your son will not be able to enlist in the army; until he is twenty-one, he will not be able to make a civil contract; until he is twenty-five, he will not be able to marry without your consent and Machecourt's. And yet you expect him at the age of nine days to have sufficient discrimination to choose a religion. Come now, you can see for yourself it is irrational."

"Oh, dear Madame Machecourt," cried the nurse, frightened at my uncle's heterodox logic, "your

brother is one of the damned. Don't let him be your child's godfather. It would bring him misfortune."

"Madame Lalande," said Benjamin, in a severe tone, "a course in midwifery is not a course in logic. It would be mean in me to argue with you. I will limit myself to one question. Were the converts that Saint John baptised in the Jordan for a sesterce and a cornet of dried dates, carried there from Jerusalem on their nurses' arms?"

"On my word," said Madame Lalande, embarrassed by the objection, "I am ready to believe it."

"What, Madame, you are ready to believe it! Is that the way for a midwife who has had religious instruction to talk? Well, since that's the way you take it, I will propose the following dilemma——"

"Let us alone with your dilemmas," interrupted my grandmother. "What does Madame Lalande know about a dilemma?"

"What, Madame!" exclaimed the nurse, piqued at my grandmother's remark. "I don't know what a dilemma is? I, the wife of a surgeon, don't know what a dilemma is? Go on, Monsieur Rathery, I am listening to you."

"There's no need to," replied my grandmother, dryly. "I have decided that Benjamin is to be the child's godfather, and that settles it. No dilemma in the world can excuse him from it."

"I appeal to Machecourt," cried Benjamin.

"Machecourt has condemned you in advance.

This morning he went to Corvol to invite Mademoiselle Minxit to be godmother."

"So you dispose of me without my consent," cried my uncle. "You haven't even the consideration to give me fair warning. What am I? Stuffed with sawdust? A gingerbread mannikin? A fine figure I shall cut with my five feet ten inches beside Mademoiselle Minxit's five feet three. Her straight, angular figure will look like a beribboned Maypole. You know, the idea of walking beside her to church has tormented me for six months, and my aversion for the obligatory act has almost made me forego the joy of becoming her husband."

"You see, Madame Lalande," said my grandmother, "what a joker Benjamin is. He loves Mademoiselle Minxit passionately, and yet he can't help laughing at her."

"Hum!" said the nurse.

Benjamin, who had forgotten Madame Lalande's presence, realised he had been guilty of a *lapsus linguae*. To escape his sister's reproaches, he hastened to declare that he consented to anything they asked of him, and made off before the nurse left.

The baptism was to take place the following Sunday. My grandmother plunged into expense for the occasion. She allowed Machecourt to invite all his and my uncle's friends to a festal meal. Benjamin, for his part, was in a position to meet the expenses that the generous rôle of godfather called for. The government had just presented him with

a hundred francs in reward of his zeal in propagating vaccination in the country and in restoring the potato, which agriculturists and physicians had been attacking, to a place of honour.

CHAPTER XIV

MY UNCLE'S SPEECH BEFORE THE BAILIFF

THE following Saturday, the day before the baptism, my uncle was cited to appear before the bailiff to hear himself sentenced, under penalty of imprisonment, to pay Monsieur Bonteint the sum of one hundred and fifty francs ten sous six deniers for merchandise sold to him. So read the summons, the cost of which was four francs five sous. Another man would have lamented his fate in all the tones of elegy. But the soul of this great man was not reached by the vicissitudes of fortune. The whirlwind of misery that society raises, the mist of tears enshrouding it, did not rise to his height. His body, it is true, was caught in the mire of humanity. When he drank too much, he got a headache; when he walked too far, he got tired; when the road was muddy, he splashed himself up to his waist; and, when he had no money to pay his score, the innkeeper charged it on his ledger. Yet, like the rock whose base is beaten by the waves but whose top shines in the sunlight, like the bird with its nest in the thickets by the wayside and soaring up in the azure skies, so Benjamin's soul, always bright and serene,

soared in a realm above the rest of humanity. He had but two needs, the satisfaction of hunger and thirst. And had the firmament fallen in pieces on the earth and had only one bottle been left intact, my uncle, sitting on the smoking ruins of a cosmic body, would calmly have drunk down the contents to the resurrection of the human race. To him the past was nothing, and the future as yet was nothing. He compared the past to an empty bottle, and the future to a chicken ready for the spit.

"What care I," said he, "what sort of drink the bottle contains? And as for the chicken, why should I roast myself turning it round and round before the fire? Perhaps exactly when it is finished roasting, and the table is laid, and I have tied my napkin on, some monster will come along and carry away the smoking fowl in his jaws.

'Eternity and Nothingness!
Ye sombre caverns of the Past!'

cries the poet. For my part, all I should try to save from the gloomy abyss would be my last red coat if it were floating about within my reach. Life is entirely in the present, and the present is the passing moment. So, of what significance is the fortune or the misfortune of a moment? Here is a beggar and here is a millionaire. God says to them, 'You have but a minute to remain upon earth.' This minute gone, he grants them a second, then a third,

and lets them live on like that to ninety. Do you think the one is really happier than the other? All the miseries that afflict man, man alone creates. The pleasures he goes to so much trouble to get are not worth a quarter of the effort he expends upon them. He is like a hunter who scours the country all day long for a thin hare or a tough partridge. We boast of the superiority of our intelligence, but what good does it do us that we can calculate the course of the stars, that we can foretell almost to a second when the moon will pass between the sun and the earth, that we can traverse the ocean solitudes with wooden boats or hempen sails, if we do not know how to enjoy the blessings with which God has equipped our existence. The animals that we look down on as dumb brutes know how to get more out of life than we do. The donkey pastures at ease in the grass without troubling whether it will grow again. It doesn't occur to the bear to guard a farmer's flocks so as to have warm mittens and a fur cap in the winter time. The hare doesn't beat the drum in a regiment in the hope of earning feed for his old age. The vulture does not get a position as a letter-carrier in order to wear a beautiful gold necklace around its bare neck. They are all content with what nature has given them, with the bed she made for them in the grass, with the roof she built for them under the blue, starry firmament.

"As soon as a ray of light shines on the plain, the bird begins to twitter on its branch, the insect hums

around the bushes, the fish leaps to the surface of its pool, the lizard comes out on the warm stones of its wall. If a shower falls from the clouds, each takes refuge in its hiding-place and waits sleeping peacefully until the sun shines again the next day. Why doesn't man do likewise?

"I hope it won't offend the great King Solomon, but the ant is the stupidest of animals. Instead of playing in the fields in the loveliest season of the year and sharing in the glorious festival that heaven bestows on the earth for six months in the year it wastes the whole summer piling up little scraps of leaves. And when the ant city is finished, a wind comes and sweeps it away under its wing."

Benjamin made Bonteint's process-server get drunk and used the stamped paper of the summons to wrap some ointment in.

The bailiff before whom my uncle was to appear was too important a personage for me to fail to describe him. Besides, my grandfather on his death-bed expressly urged me to do so, and I would not fail in this pious duty for anything in the world.

The bailiff, like so many others, was born of poor parents. His swaddling-clothes had been made of a gendarme's old cloak, and he began his studies in jurisprudence by cleaning his father's big sword and currying his sorrel. I cannot explain to you how the bailiff rose from the lowest rank of the judicial hierarchy to the highest judicial position in the neighbourhood. All I can say is that the lizard

reaches the peaks of the high rocks as well as the eagle.

The bailiff had a number of set ideas, among them that he was a great personage. The lowliness of his birth troubled him. He could not conceive how a man like himself had not been born a gentleman. He ascribed it to an error on the Creator's part. He would have given his wife, his children, and his clerk for a pitiful coat of arms. Nature had been tolerably good to the bailiff. Though she had dealt out intelligence to him in neither too large nor too small a portion, yet she had added a large dose of shrewdness and self-assurance. The bailiff was neither stupid nor clever. He stood exactly between the two camps; he never crossed over into the camp of the people of intelligence, while he made frequent incursions into the accessible territory of the others. Since he was denied the wit of clever men, he contented himself with the wit of fools—he made puns. It was the duty of the lawyers and their wives to think his puns very funny. His clerk had to spread them among the people, and even explain them to those dullards who at first failed to get the point. Thanks to this agreeable social talent, the bailiff had acquired the reputation of a man of wit in a certain circle. But my uncle said he had purchased his reputation with counterfeit coin.

Was the bailiff an honest man? I should not like to take it upon myself to assert the contrary. You know the code of laws gives an accurate defini-

tion of the concept robber, and society looks upon all those who are not included in the definition as honest people, and the bailiff was one of those not included in the definition. By various machinations he succeeded in conducting not only the business, but even the pleasures of the town. As a magistrate, he was not a personage to be highly recommended. He thoroughly understood the law, to be sure, but when it went counter to his likes or his dislikes, he simply set it aside. The charge was made against him that one scale of his balance was of gold and the other of wood, and as a matter of fact, I don't know how, but his friends were always right and his enemies always wrong. An offence always incurred the highest penalty of the law, and if the bailiff could have added to it, he would have done so with a will. Nevertheless the law cannot always be twisted to suit one's purposes; so, when the bailiff was obliged to pass sentence upon a man whom he feared or from whom he hoped for something, he got out of the dilemma by declining to pronounce judgment, and then got his following to boast of his impartiality. The bailiff courted universal admiration. He cordially, but secretly, detested those who had any sort of superiority that cast him into the shade. If you pretended to believe in his importance, even if you sought his protection, you made him the happiest of men. But if you failed to take your hat off to him, the insult buried itself so deeply in his memory and made such a wound that if you

and he lived to be a hundred he never would have forgiven you. So woe to the unfortunate who did not salute the bailiff. If some matter brought the man to court, the bailiff would know a skilful way of treating him roughly so as to drive him to show lack of respect. Then vengeance became duty, and he had the man thrown in prison, all the while deploring the sad necessity that his office imposed upon him. Often, even, to make people believe in his grief, he carried hypocrisy so far as to take to his bed, and on special occasions even had himself bled.

The bailiff paid court to God just as he did to the earthly powers. He never absented himself from high mass, and his place was always in the very middle of the vestrymen's pew. That brought him every Sunday a share of the blessed bread and also the curé's protection. Could he have had an official report drawn up testifying to his having attended divine service, he undoubtedly would have done so. But these little faults were compensated for by brilliant qualities. No one understood better than he how to organise a ball at the town's expense or a banquet in honour of the Duc de Nivernais. On such festive occasions he was magnificent in his dignity, his appetite, and his puns. Lamoignon or President Molé would have been small beside him. For ten years he had been hoping to receive the cross of Saint Louis in reward for the eminent services he rendered the city. And when Lafayette was given the cross after his American cam-

paigns, he muttered to himself against the injustice.

Such was the bailiff morally. As for his body, it was a fat figure, although he had not yet attained his full majesty. His figure resembled an ellipse enlarged at the lower end. He might have been compared to an ostrich-egg on two legs. Perfidious nature, which lets the manchineel tree cast a broad, heavy shade beneath a fiery sky, bestowed upon the bailiff the appearance of an honest man. And he loved to make an impression. It was a glorious day in his life when he could go from the courthouse to the church escorted by the firemen.

The bailiff always stood as stiff as a statue on a pedestal. If you had not known him, you would have said he had a plaster of Burgundy pitch or a broad blister between his shoulders. On the street he walked as if carrying the holy sacrament. His step was as invariably the same length as a yard-stick. A shower of spears would not have made him lengthen it an inch. With the bailiff as his single instrument an astronomer could have measured an arc of the meridian.

My uncle did not hate the bailiff. He did not even honour him with his contempt. But in presence of such moral baseness he felt something like nausea of his soul, and sometimes he said the man had the effect upon him of a great toad squatting on a velvet arm-chair.

As for the bailiff, he hated Benjamin with the whole force of his bilious soul. Benjamin was not

ignorant of this, but it made very little difference to him.

My grandmother, fearing a conflict between these two such opposite natures, wanted Benjamin to refrain from going to court. But the great man, confident of the strength of his will, disdained this timid counsel. His one concession was to abstain from his customary allowance of mulled wine on Saturday morning.

Bonteint's lawyer proved that his client had a right to a verdict of imprisonment for debt. When he had exhausted every argument, the bailiff asked Benjamin what he had to say in his defence.

"I have only a simple remark to make," said my uncle, "but it is worth more than Monsieur's whole speech, because it is irrefutable. I am five feet ten inches above the level of the sea and six inches above the average height. So, I think——"

"Monsieur Rathery," interrupted the bailiff, "no matter how *great* a man you may be, you have no right to joke with justice."

"If I wanted to joke," said my uncle, "it would not be with so powerful a personage as your Honour, whose justice, moreover, does not joke. But when I affirm that I am five feet ten inches above the level of the sea, I am not making a joke. I am offering a serious defence. Your Honour can have me measured if he doubts the truth of my statement. I think——"

"Monsieur Rathery," snapped the bailiff, "if you

continue in this vein, I shall be obliged to forbid your talking."

"Not necessary," answered my uncle. "I am done. So I think," he added, bringing his words out precipitately, "that the body of a man of my size is not to be seized for fifty miserable crowns."

"According to you," said the bailiff, "the seizure of the body can be practised only on one of your arms, or one of your legs, or perhaps even on your queue."

"In the first place," answered my uncle, "your Honour will note that my queue is not in question. Secondly, I make no such assumption as your Honour attributes to me. I was born undivided, and I intend to remain undivided all my life. But the security is worth at least double the amount of the debt. I beg your Honour to order that the sentence for seizure of my body shall not be executed until Bontein shall have furnished me with three more red coats."

"Monsieur Rathery, this is not a tavern. I beg you to remember to whom you are talking. Your remarks are as ill-considered as your person."

"Monsieur bailiff," answered my uncle, "I have a good memory, and I know very well to whom I am talking. I have been too carefully brought up by my dear sister in the fear of God and the gendarmes to allow me to forget it. As for taverns, since you mention the subject, taverns are too highly appreciated by respectable people to need my defence of them. If we go to a tavern when we are

How my Uncle
defends himself before the Bailiff
and walks off triumphant

thirsty, it is because we have not the privilege of refreshing ourselves at the city's expense. The tavern is the wine-cellar of those who have none, and the wine-cellar of those who have one is nothing but a tavern without a sign. It ill becomes those who drink a bottle of Burgundy and something else for their dinner to abuse the poor devil who now and then regales himself at the tavern with a pint of Croix-Pataux. Those official orgies where men get drunk toasting the king and the Duc de Nivernais are, stripped of fine speech, simply what the people call drinking bouts. To get drunk at one's own table is supposed to be more decent, but to get drunk at a tavern is nobler and more profitable to the public treasury. As to the consideration attaching to my person, it is not so widespread as that which Monsieur can claim for his person, inasmuch as I enjoy the consideration of none but honest people. However——"

"Monsieur Rathery," cried the bailiff, finding no better and easier answer to the epigrams with which my uncle was tormenting him, "you are insolent."

"So be it," replied Benjamin, knocking off a bit of straw from the facing of his coat, "but I must in conscience warn your Honour that this morning I have kept within the strictest limits of temperance, and if your Honour tries to make me depart from the respect I owe your robe, I cannot be held responsible for the consequences."

"Monsieur Rathery," exclaimed the bailiff, "your

allusions are an insult to the court. I fine you thirty sous."

"Here are three francs," said my uncle, putting a coin on the judge's green table. "Take your pay out of that."

"Monsieur Rathery," cried the bailiff in exasperation, "leave the room."

"Monsieur bailiff, I have the honour to salute you. My compliments to Madame your wife, if you please."

"I fine you forty sous more," screamed the judge.

"What, a fine of forty sous for presenting my compliments to Madame your wife."

And he went out.

"That devil of a man!" said the bailiff in the evening to his wife. "I should never have supposed that he would be so self-controlled. But let him look out. I have issued a warrant for his arrest, and I shall persuade Bonteint to execute it immediately. He shall learn what it means to defy me. He can wait long till I invite him to the festivities given by the city, and if I can cut off his practice——"

"For shame!" answered his wife. "Is that the right way for a man who sits in the vestryman's pew to talk? Besides, what has M. Rathery done to you? He is such a jolly, cultured, delightful man."

"I will tell you what he has done to me, Madame. He has dared to remind me that your father-in-law was a gendarme, and said he is wittier and more honest than I am. Is that a small matter?"

By the next morning my uncle had forgotten about the warrant issued for his arrest. He started off for church, powdered and solemn, Mademoiselle Minxit on his right and his sword on his left. He was followed by Page, who was evidently pleased by the appearance he presented in his best brown coat; by Arthus, whose abdomen was enveloped to a point beyond its diameter by a waistcoat embroidered with large branches and birds fluttering among them; by Millot-Rataut, who wore a brick-coloured wig and whose yellowish shinbones were dotted with black; and by a great many others, whose names I do not care to hand down to posterity. Parlanta alone failed to answer to the call. Two violins squeaked at the head of the procession. Machecourt and his wife brought up the rear. Benjamin, always munificent, scattered sweetmeats and the pennies from the vaccination money. Gaspard, very proud to serve as a pocket, walked by his side, carrying the sweetmeats in a big bag.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW PARLANTA ARRESTED MY UNCLE, WHILE ACTING AS GODFATHER, AND PUT HIM IN PRISON

BUT lo! Quite another ceremony was in store for him! Parlanta had been expressly ordered by Bonteint' and the bailiff to execute the warrant during the ceremony. He had concealed his assistants in the vestibule of the court-house, and himself awaited the procession at the church portal.

As soon as he saw my uncle's three-cornered hat rise above the steps of Vieille-Rome, he went up to him and summoned him in the name of the king to follow him to prison.

"Parlanta," answered my uncle, "what you are doing ill accords with the rules of French politeness. Couldn't you have waited until to-morrow, and come and dined with us to-day?"

"If it makes very much difference to you, I will wait. But I'll tell you, the bailiff's orders were very explicit, and I run the risk of bringing his vengeance down on me in this life and the next."

"In that case, do your duty," said Benjamin; and he asked Page to take his place beside Mademoiselle

How Rathery takes
leave of Arabella and the Tailer brings
him and Mackecourt two little
Glasses of Wine

Minxit. Then, bowing with all the grace that his five feet ten inches would allow, he said:

"You see, Mademoiselle, that I am forced to leave you. I beg you to believe that nothing less than a summons in the name of His Majesty could induce me to do such a thing. I wish Parlanta had allowed me to enjoy the pleasure of this ceremony to the end, but these sheriff's officers are like death. They snatch their prey anywhere, they tear it violently from the arms of the loved one as a child catches a butterfly by its gauze wings and tears it from the rose's heart."

"It is as disagreeable to me as to you," said Mademoiselle Minxit, pulling a long face. "Your friend is short and as round as a ball, and he wears a wig *à marteaux*. I shall look like a bean pole beside him."

"What can I do about it?" said Benjamin, dryly, hurt by such egoism. "I cannot make you any shorter, or M. Page any thinner, and I cannot lend him my queue."

Benjamin took leave of the company and followed Parlanta, whistling his favourite air:

"Marlbrough is off to war."

He halted a moment at the threshold of the prison to cast a last glance at the free spaces about to be shut off behind him. He saw his sister standing motionless, holding her husband's arm and looking after Benjamin sadly. At the sight of her look,

Benjamin quickly shut the door behind him and rushed into the prison-yard.

That night my grandfather and his wife paid him a visit. They found him standing on the steps, throwing the rest of his sweetmeats to his companions in captivity and laughing gleefully to see them scramble for them.

"What the devil are you doing?" said my grandfather.

"You see," answered Benjamin, "I am finishing the baptismal ceremony. Don't you find that these men falling over each other to pick up insipid sweetmeats are a true picture of society? Isn't that the way the poor inhabitants of the earth push each other, trample on each other, throw each other down, to snatch at the gifts God has thrown them? Isn't that the way the strong man tramples on the weak man? Isn't that the way the weak man bleeds and cries? Isn't that the way the man who has taken everything arrogantly scorns and insults the man whom he has left nothing? And isn't that the way when the man who has nothing dares to complain the other kicks him? These poor devils are breathless, covered with sweat, their fingers are bruised, their faces torn. Not one of them has come out of the struggle without a scratch. Had they listened to their real interests would they not have done better to share the sweetmeats like brothers instead of fighting over them like enemies?"

"Possibly," answered Machecourt. "But try not

to be too bored this evening and be sure to sleep well to-night, because to-morrow morning you will be free."

"How so?" answered Benjamin.

"To get you out of here we have sold our little vineyard in Choulot."

"Is the contract signed?" inquired Benjamin, anxiously.

"Not yet," said my grandfather, "but we are to meet to-night to sign it."

"Now listen, Machecourt, and you, my dear sister. Listen very carefully to what I am going to say. If you sell your vineyard to get me out of Bonteint's clutches, the first use I shall make of my liberty will be to leave your house. And you will never in all your life see me again."

"Nevertheless," said Machecourt, "it's got to be done. A brother can't do differently. I can't let you stay in prison when I have the means of getting you out. You take things as a philosopher, but I am not a philosopher. As long as you are in this place, I shan't be able to eat a morsel or drink a glass of white wine."

"And I," said my grandmother, "do you think I can get along without seeing you any more? Didn't our mother on her death-bed tell me to take care of you? Haven't I brought you up? Don't I look upon you as the oldest of my children? And my poor children, they're a sad sight. Since you've been gone, you'd think there was a coffin in the

house. They all wanted to come along to see you. And Nanette absolutely refused to touch her cake. She had to keep it for uncle Benjamin, who was in prison and had only black bread to eat."

"This is too much," said Benjamin, clutching my grandfather's shoulders. "Go away, Machecourt, and you too, my dear sister, go away, please do. You will make me be guilty of a weakness. And I warn you again, if you sell your vineyard to buy me out of here, I will never in my life set eyes on you again."

"Nonsense, you silly!" answered my grandmother, "isn't a brother worth more than a vineyard? If you had the chance, wouldn't you do the same for us that we're doing for you? And when you get to be rich, aren't you going to help us take care of our children? With your profession and your talents you can return us a hundredfold what we are giving you to-day. And then, my God, what will people say of us if we should leave you behind the bars for a debt of a hundred and fifty francs? Come, Benjamin, be a good brother, don't be obstinate, don't make us all unhappy by insisting on staying here."

While my grandmother was speaking, Benjamin kept his head hidden in his hands, trying to repress the tears that were gathering under his eyelids.

"Machecourt," he cried suddenly, "I can't stand this any longer. Tell Boutron to bring me a little glass of brandy, and come and kiss me. See," he

said, squeezing him to his chest so hard that he almost cried out with pain, "you are the first man I have ever kissed and these are the first tears I have shed since I used to be flogged."

And my poor uncle actually burst into tears. But the jailer brought two small glasses of brandy, and Benjamin had no sooner emptied his than he turned as bright and serene as an April sky after a shower.

My grandmother tried again to make him change his mind, but her words had no more effect than the moon's rays upon an icicle.

The only thing that troubled him was that the jailer had seen him cry. So Machecourt willy-nilly had to keep his vineyard.

CHAPTER XVI

A BREAKFAST IN PRISON—HOW MY UNCLE GOT OUT OF PRISON

THE next morning, as my uncle was taking a walk in the prison-yard, whistling a familiar air, Arthus entered, followed by three men with baskets on their backs covered with white linen.

"Good morning, Benjamin," he said, "we have come to breakfast with you, since you cannot come to breakfast with us."

At the same time came filing in Page, Rapin, Guillerand, Millot-Rataut, and Machecourt. Parlanta brought up the rear, looking a little abashed. My uncle went up to him, and, taking his hand, said:

"Well, Parlanta, I hope you don't bear me any ill-will for making you lose a good dinner yesterday."

"On the contrary," answered Parlanta, "I was afraid you would be angry with me for not allowing you to go through with the baptism."

"I want you to know, Benjamin," broke in Page, "that we have assessed ourselves to get you out of here. But, as we have no ready cash, we act as if

M. Rapin

money had not been invented. We give Bonteint our respective services, each according to his profession. I will plead his first case for him, Parlanta will write two summonses for him, Arthus will draw up his will, Rapin will give him two or three consultations that will cost him dearer than he thinks; Guillerand will give his children some excuse for grammar lessons, Rataut, who is a poet and therefore is nothing, engages himself on his honour to buy of him all the coats he may need for the next two years, which, in my opinion and his, does not engage him to very much."

"And does Bonteint accept?" said Benjamin.

"Accept?" said Page, "why, he receives value amounting to more than five hundred francs. It was Rapin who arranged this matter with him yesterday. The only thing left to do is to draw up the documents."

"Well," said my uncle, "I will contribute my share in this good work. I will treat him free of charge the next two times he gets sick. If I kill him the first time, his wife shall inherit the privilege of the second. As for you, Machecourt, I'll let you subscribe a jug of white wine."

Meantime Arthus had had the table set at the jailer's. He took from the baskets the dishes, the contents of all of which had become somewhat mixed together, and placed them in their order on the table.

"Come," he shouted, "let us sit down, and a

truce to your talking. I don't like to be disturbed when I am eating. You'll have plenty of time to chatter at dessert."

The breakfast did not taste at all of the place in which it was partaken. Machecourt alone was a little sad, for the arrangement made with Bonteint by my uncle's friends seemed to him like a joke.

"Come, Machecourt," cried Benjamin, "your glass is always in your hand, full or empty. Are you the prisoner here, or am I? By the way, gentlemen, do you know that Machecourt came near perpetrating a good deed yesterday? He wanted to sell his good vineyard to pay Bonteint my ransom."

"Magnificent!" cried Page.

"Succulent!" said Arthus.

"Morality in action," remarked Guillerand.

"Gentlemen," interjected Rapin, "virtue must be honoured wherever one is fortunate enough to find it. I propose, therefore, that every time Machecourt sits down at table with us, he shall be given an arm-chair."

"So ordered," cried all the guests together, "and here's to Machecourt's health!"

"Upon my word!" said my uncle, "I don't see why people are so afraid of prison. Isn't this fowl as tender and this Bordeaux as delicious on this side of the bars as on the other?"

"Yes," said Guillerand, "as long as there is grass near the wall to which it is fastened the goat does

not feel its tether, but when the place is stripped, it begins to worry and tries to break it."

"To go from the grass that grows in the valley to that which grows on the mountain is the liberty of the goat," my uncle answered, "but man's liberty does not consist in merely doing just as he pleases. He whose body has been imprisoned but who has been left the liberty to think at his will is a hundred times freer than he whose soul is held captive in the chains of an odious occupation. The prisoner undoubtedly passes sad hours in contemplating through his bars the road that winds through the plain and loses itself in the bluish shade of some far-off forest. He would like to be the poor woman who leads her cow along the road, twirling her distaff, or the poor wood-cutter who goes back loaded with boughs to his hut smoking above the trees. But this liberty to be where one likes, to go straight ahead until one is weary or is stopped by a ditch—who possesses it? Is not the paralytic a prisoner in his bed, the merchant in his shop, the clerk in his office, the burgher in his little town, the king in his kingdom, and God himself in the icy circumference that encircles the world? You go breathless and dripping with perspiration over a road burned with the sun. Here are tall trees that spread their lofty tiers of verdure beside you, and ironically shake their yellow leaves on your head as if in sport. I am sure you would like very much to rest a moment in their shade and wipe your feet on

the moss that carpets their roots. But between them and you there are six feet of wall, or the sharp-pointed bars of an iron grating. Arthus, Rapin, and all of you who have only a stomach, who after breakfast can only think of dinner—I don't know whether you will understand me. But Millot-Rataut, who is a tailor and composes Christmas songs, he will understand me. I have often desired to follow the wind-driven cloud in its wanderings across the sky. Often when, resting my elbows on the window-sill, and dreamily following the moon which seemed to look at me like a human face, I have had the desire to fly away like a bubble of air toward those mysterious regions of solitude that spread above my head, and I should have given all the world to sit for a moment on one of those gigantic peaks which rend the white surface of that planet. Was I not then also a captive on the earth as truly as the poor prisoner within the high walls of his prison?"

"Gentlemen," said Page, "one thing must be admitted. To the rich man the prison is made too pleasant and comfortable. It punishes him the way a spoiled child is punished, like that nymph who whipped Cupid with a rose. If the rich man is allowed to take into prison his kitchen, wine-cellar, library, parlour, then he is not a convict undergoing punishment, but a burgher who has changed his lodgings. Here you are sitting before a nice fire, wrapped in the wadding of your dressing-gown.

With your feet on the andirons you digest your food in your stomach fragrant with truffles and champagne. The snow comes fluttering down on the bars of your window while you blow the bluish smoke of your cigar to the ceiling. You dream, you think, you build castles in the air or write verses. At your side is your newspaper, that friend which you leave, which you call back, and which you cast away for good when it becomes too tiresome. What is there in such a situation, I should like to know, that resembles a penalty? Haven't you passed hours, days, entire weeks like that, without leaving your house? And while you are passing your time in this manner, what is the judge doing, who has had the barbarity to condemn you to this torture? He is hearing cases from eleven o'clock in the morning, shivering in his black robe and listening to the rigmarole of some lawyer who repeats the same thing over and over again. And while thus occupied catarrh seizes his lungs with its numbing clutch, or chilblains bite his toes with their sharp teeth. You say that you are not free! On the contrary, you are a hundred times freer than in your house. Your whole day belongs to you. You get up when you like, go to bed when you like, do what you like, and you don't have to shave either.

"Take Benjamin, for instance. He is a prisoner. Do you think Bonteint has served him such a bad turn in having him shut up here? He often had to rise before the street lamps were out. With one

stocking on wrong side out, he went from door to door, inspecting this one's tongue and feeling that one's pulse. When he had finished on one side, he had to begin on the other. He splashed himself on the cross-roads up to his queue; and the peasants generally had nothing to offer him but curds and black bread. When he came home at night very tired, had settled himself comfortably in his bed, and was beginning to taste the joys of the early hours of sleep, he would be brutally awakened and called to the mayor choking with indigestion, or to the bailiff's wife who was having a miscarriage. Here he is free of all this bother and worry. He is as well off here as a rat in a Dutch cheese. Bonteint has made him a present of a little income, which he is consuming like a philosopher. Verily he is like the lily of the Gospel. He bleeds not, neither does he prescribe purgatives, and yet is well fed; he toils not, neither does he spin, and yet is arrayed in a magnificent red robe. Upon my word, we are fools to pity him, and enemies to his comfort to try to get him out of here."

"It is comfortable here, I grant you," answered my uncle, "but I'd rather be uncomfortable elsewhere. That shall not prevent me from admitting Page's contention that not only is the prison too pleasant for the rich man, but too pleasant for everybody. It is undoubtedly hard to cry to the law when it scourges a poor, unfortunate fellow, 'Strike harder, you don't hurt him enough.' But we must

also guard against that unintelligent, short-sighted philanthropy which sees nothing beyond his misfortune. Real philosophers, like Guillerand, like Millot-Rataut, like Parlanta, in a word, like all of us, should consider men only *en masse*, as we consider a wheat field. A social question should always be regarded from the standpoint of the public interest. You have distinguished yourself by a fine feat of arms, and the king decorates you with the cross of Saint Louis. Do you think it's from good-will toward yourself, in the interest of your own individual glory that His Majesty authorises you to wear his gracious image on your breast? Ah, no, my poor brave! It is in his own interest first, and in that of the State, next. It is in order that those who, like you, have hot blood in their veins, may imitate your example, seeing how generously you have been rewarded. Now, suppose that, instead of a good deed, you have committed a crime. You have killed, not three or four men who are different from you because they don't wear the same kind of coat-collar that you do, but a good burgher of your own country. The judge has sentenced you to death, and the king has refused to pardon you. There is nothing left for you now but to make your general confession and begin your lamentation. Now, what feeling moved the judge to pass this sentence upon you? Did he wish to rid society of you, as when one kills a mad dog, or to punish you, as when one whips a bad boy? In the first place, if his object had been

simply to cut you off from society, a very deep cell with a very thick door and a loop-hole for a window would have been quite sufficient. Then the judge often condemns to death a man who has attempted to commit suicide, and to prison a poor fellow to whom he knows that the prison will be a welcome place of refuge. Is it to punish them that he grants these two good-for-nothings precisely what they ask for, that he performs for one, to whom existence is a torture, an operation that ends his life, and that he gives to the other, who has neither bread nor a roof over his head, a place of refuge? The judge has but one object in view. By punishing you he wants to frighten those who would be tempted to follow your example.

"'People, look out, don't kill,' that's all the judge's sentence means. If you could substitute a mannikin for yourself who looks like you and put him under the knife, it would be all the same to the judge. If even after the executioner had cut off your head and shown it to the people he could resuscitate you, I am very sure he would willingly do so. For, after all, the judge is a good man, and he would not like to have his cook kill a chicken before his eyes.

"They cry aloud, and you proclaim it too, that it is better to let ten guilty men go unpunished than to condemn one innocent man. That's the most deplorable of all the absurdities to which modern fashionable philanthropy has given birth. It is an anti-

social principle. I, for my part, maintain that it is better to condemn ten innocent men than to acquit a single guilty man."

At these words all the guests raised a great outcry against my uncle.

"No, indeed," said my uncle, "I am not joking. This is no subject for laughter. I express a strong, firm, a long-settled conviction. The whole city pities the innocent man who mounts the scaffold. The newspapers raise lamentations, and your poets make him the martyred hero of their dramas. But how many innocent men perish in your rivers, on your highways, in your mine pits, or even in your workshops, crushed by the ferocious teeth of your machines, those gigantic animals that seize a man by surprise and swallow him before your eyes, without your being able to help him. Yet their death hardly wrings an exclamation from you. You pass by, and after you have gone a few steps you think no more about it. You even don't think of mentioning it to your wife at dinner. The next day the newspaper buries him in a corner of its pages, throws over his body a few lines of heavy prose, and all is ended. Why this indifference for one and this superabundance of pity for the other? Why ring the funeral knell of the one with a little bell and of the other with a big one? Is a judge's mistake a more terrible accident than an overturned stage-coach or a deranged machine? Do not my innocents make as big a hole in society as yours? Do they not leave

the wife a widow and the children orphans as well as yours?

"Undoubtedly it is not pleasant to go to the scaffold for another. If the thing should happen to me, I admit I should be very much annoyed. But, in relation to society as a whole, what is the little blood that the executioner sheds? A drop of water oozing out of a reservoir, a blighted acorn falling from an oak. The condemnation of an innocent man by a judge is a consequence of our system of justice, just as the fall of a carpenter from the top of a house is a consequence of man having his shelter under a roof. Of a thousand bottles a workman makes, he breaks at least one. Of a thousand sentences a judge passes, at least one is bound to be unjust. It is an evil to be expected, and for which there is no possible remedy except the total suppression of justice. What would you think of an old woman picking over beans who kept all the rubbish because she was afraid she might throw away one good bean? Would not a judge be acting the same way who acquitted ten guilty men for fear of condemning one innocent one?

"Moreover, the condemnation of an innocent man is a rare thing. It marks an epoch in the annals of justice. It is almost impossible that a fortuitous concourse of circumstances should so unite against a man as to overwhelm him with charges which he cannot disprove. And even in such a case I maintain that there is in the attitude of an accused man,

in his look, in his gesture, in the sound of his voice, elements of evidence which cannot escape the judge. Besides, the death of an innocent man is only an individual misfortune, while the acquittal of a guilty man is a public calamity. Crime listens at the doors of your court-room. It knows what is going on inside, it calculates the chances of safety which your indulgence affords. It applauds you when, through excess of caution, it sees you acquit a guilty man, for it is crime itself that you acquit. Justice should not be too severe, there is no doubt of that. But, when it is too indulgent, it abdicates, it destroys itself. Men predestined to crime will abandon themselves without fear to their instincts, and no longer see in their dreams the sinister face of the executioner. No longer will the scaffold rise between them and their victims. They will take your money if they need it, and your life if it stands in their way. You congratulate yourself, good soul that you are, on having saved an innocent man from the axe, but you have caused twenty to die by the dagger. So you have a balance of nineteen murders against your account.

"And now I come back to the prison. To inspire wholesome terror, the prison must be a place of misery and suffering. Yet, there are in France fifteen million men who are more miserable in their houses than the prisoner behind the bars. 'Too happy if he but knew his happiness,' says the poet. That's all very well in an eclogue. The husband-

man is the mountain thistle. Not a ray of sunlight that does not burn him, not a breath of the north wind that does not bite him, not a downpour of rain that does not drench him. He toils from the morning angelus till the evening angelus. He has an old father, and he cannot soften the rigour of his old age. He has a beautiful wife, and he can give her nothing but rags. He has children, a hungry brood, continually calling for bread, and often there is not a crumb in the bin. The prisoner, on the other hand, is warmly clad and sufficiently fed. He does not have to earn his bread before he puts it in his mouth. He laughs, he sings, he plays, he sleeps on his straw as long as he likes, and yet he is the object of public pity. Charitable persons organise societies to make his prison less uncomfortable, and they do it so well that, instead of being a punishment, imprisonment becomes a reward. Beautiful ladies boil his pot and prepare his soup. They preach morality to him with white bread and meat. Surely this man will prefer the careless and gay captivity of the prison to the pinching liberty of the fields or the shop. The prison ought to be the hell of the city. I should like to see it rise in the middle of the public square, gloomy and robed in black like the judge. Through its little grated windows it should cast sinister looks at the passers-by. From within its enclosures there should issue, not songs, but only the sound of clanking chains or barking dogs. The old man should be afraid to rest under its walls.

How Arthus brings
Rathery breakfast and Monsut brings him
Bontemt's Discharge

The child should not dare to play within its shadow. The belated burgher should turn out of his way and shun it as be shuns the graveyard. Only in this way will you obtain from the prison the result that you expect from it."

My uncle might still have been discussing, had not M. Minxit arrived to cut short his argument. The worthy man was streaming with perspiration. He gasped for breath like a porpoise stranded on the beach, and was as red as the case in which my uncle carried his surgical instruments.

"Benjamin," he cried, mopping his forehead, "I have come to take you to breakfast with me."

"How so, Monsieur Minxit?" cried all the guests together.

"Why, because Benjamin is free. That's the key to the whole riddle. Here," he added, pulling a paper from his pocket and handing it to Boutron, "here is Bonteint's discharge."

"Bravo, Monsieur Minxit!"

And all rose, and, glass in hand, drank to M. Minxit's health. Machecourt tried to get up but he fell back on his chair. Joy almost deprived him of his senses. Benjamin chanced to cast a glance at him.

"What, Machecourt," exclaimed Benjamin, whose eyes happened to fall on him just then, "are you mad? Drink to Minxit's health, or I'll bleed you on the spot."

Machecourt rose mechanically, emptied his glass at one swallow, and began to weep.

"My good Monsieur Minxit," continued Benjamin, "may I——"

"All right, all right!" said Minxit. "I get you. You are making ready to thank me. Poor boy, never mind. I herewith absolve you of the onus. It is for my own good and not yours that I have taken you out of here. You know very well I cannot get along without you. You see, gentlemen, at the bottom of all our actions, no matter how generous they may seem, there is only egoism. It may not be a pleasant maxim, but I can't help it, it's true."

"Monsieur Boutron," said Benjamin, "is Bonteint's discharge in proper legal form?"

"I see nothing the matter with it except a big blot which the honest cloth dealer has doubtless added by way of a flourish."

"In that case, gentlemen," said Benjamin, "permit me to go to my dear sister to announce this good news to her myself."

"I'll go with you," said Machecourt. "I want to be a witness of her joy. Never since the day Gaspard came into the world have I been so happy."

"Permit me," said M. Minxit, sitting down to table. "Monsieur Boutron, another plate! Well, in retaliation, I herewith extend my invitation to you for supper at Corvol this evening."

This proposition was received with acclamation by all the guests. After breakfast they retired to the coffee-room to await the hour of parting.

CHAPTER XVII

A TRIP TO CORVOL

THE waiter came to tell my uncle that there was an old woman at the door who wanted to speak to him.

"Tell her to come in," said Benjamin, "and give her some refreshments."

"Yes," answered the waiter, "but you see the old woman is not at all inviting. She is ragged, and she is weeping tears as big as my little finger."

"She is weeping?" cried my uncle. "Why didn't you tell me that at once, you scamp?"

And he hurried out of the room.

The old woman who had called for my uncle was really shedding big tears, which she wiped away with an old piece of red calico.

"What's the matter, my good woman?" said Benjamin, in a tone of politeness that he did not use toward everyone. "What can I do for you?"

"You must come to Sembert to see my sick son," said the old woman.

"Sembert? The village at the top of Monts-le-Duc? Why, that's half way to heaven! All right, I'll call to-morrow afternoon."

"If you don't come to-day," said the old woman, "the priest will be there with his black cross to-morrow. It may be too late already. My son has a carbuncle."

"That's bad both for your son and for me. But why don't you ask Doctor Arnout? That would be best all around."

"I did ask him, but he knows we are poor and that he will not be paid for his visits, and so he doesn't want to disturb himself."

"What," said my uncle, "you have no money to pay your doctor? That puts a different face on the matter. Now I'm interested. All I'll ask you is to give me time enough to empty a little glass I have left on the table, then I'll go with you. By the way, we'll need some Peruvian bark. Here is a little coin. Go to Perier's and buy a few ounces. Tell him I didn't have time to write a prescription."

A quarter of an hour later my uncle, with the old woman at his side, was trudging up those uncultivated and savage slopes that begin the faubourg of Bethléem and terminate in the broad plateau on top of which is perched the hamlet of Sembert.

M. Minxit and his guests departed in a cart drawn by four horses. All the inhabitants of the faubourg of Beuvron turned out and stood at the doorways with candles in their hand to see them pass. It was indeed a more curious phenomenon than an eclipse. Arthus was singing, "When the lights are lit," Guillerand, "Marlbrough has gone to war," and the

poet Millot, whom they had fastened to one of the cart-stakes because he didn't seem very steady, intoned his *Christmas Hymn*. M. Minxit prided himself on his magnificence. He gave his guests a memorable supper, which is still being talked about at Corvol. Unfortunately he was so prodigal with his toasts that his guests were unable to raise their glasses when they reached the second course.

Meanwhile Benjamin arrived. He was worn out with fatigue and in a humour to kill everybody, for his patient had died under his hands, and he had fallen two times on the road. But no sorrow or vexation could hold its own with Benjamin before a white table-cloth adorned with bottles. So he sat down to table as if nothing had happened.

"Your friends are milksops," said M. Minxit. "I should have expected greater power of resistance from sheriff's officers, manufacturers, and schoolteachers. I won't even have the satisfaction of offering them champagne. Why, look, Machecourt doesn't recognise you, and Guillerand is holding out his snuff-box instead of his glass to Arthus."

"What do you expect?" answered Benjamin. "Not everybody has your strength, Monsieur Minxit."

"Yes," replied the worthy man, flattered by the compliment, "but what are we going to do with all these chicken-hearted fellows? I haven't enough beds for all of them, and they are in no condition to go back to Clamecy to-night."

"That needn't bother you any," said my uncle. "Have some straw spread in your barn, and as fast as they fall asleep, have them carried out there. To keep them from catching cold put the big straw mat over them which you use to protect the bed of radishes from the frost."

"You are right," said M. Minxit.

He sent for two musicians, put them under the command of the sergeant, and the plan proposed by my uncle was carried out to the letter. Millot soon dropped off to sleep, and the sergeant swung him over his shoulder and carried him off as if he were a clock-case. The transportation of Rapin, Parlanta, and the others presented no serious difficulties. But when it came to Arthus he proved to be so heavy that they had to let him sleep where he was. As for my uncle, he emptied his last bumper of champagne, said good-night and retired to the barn in his turn.

The next morning, when M. Minxit's guests arose, they looked like sugar-loaves just taken out of their cases, and all the domestics of the house had to be put to work to remove the straw from their clothes. After breakfasting off the second course which they had left untouched the night before, they started off at a brisk trot with their four horses.

They would have reached Clamecy very happily, but for a little accident that happened on the way. The horses, overexcited by the whip, upset the cart

into one of the many dirty holes that dotted the road at that time, and they all fell pell-mell into the mud. The poet Millot, hapless as ever, found himself lying with Arthus on top of him.

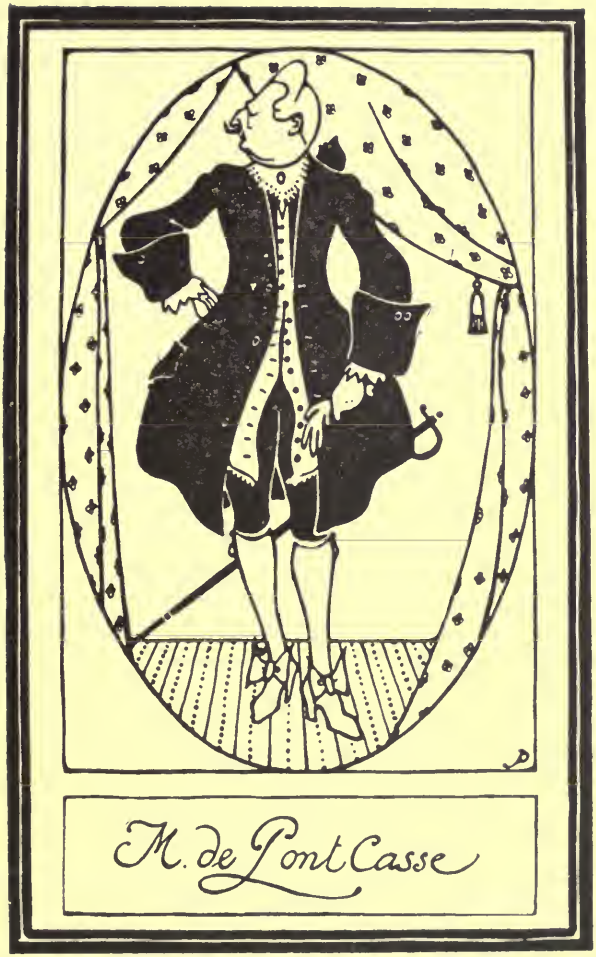
Fortunately for his coat, Benjamin had remained at Corvol. That day M. Minxit entertained at dinner all the celebrities of the neighbourhood, two noblemen among others. One of these illustrious guests was M. de Pont-Cassé, a red musketeer. The other was a musketeer of the same colour, a friend of M. de Pont-Cassé, whom he had invited to spend a few weeks with him in the remains of his castle. Now, M. de Pont-Cassé, into whose confidence we have already taken our readers, would not have been indisposed to repair the damages of his decayed fortune with M. Minxit's. So he made a diligent pursuit of Arabella, whom he had his eye on, although he often told his friends that she was an insect hatched in urine. Arabella had allowed herself to be taken in by his exaggeratedly fine manners. She thought him far handsomer with his faded plumes and far more amiable with his court frippery than my uncle with his unpretentious wit and his red coat. But M. Minxit, who was a man not only of wit, but of common sense, did not share this opinion at all. Though M. de Pont-Cassé had been a colonel, he would not let him have his daughter. He had made Benjamin stay for dinner to give Arabella an opportunity to compare her two adorers, which, in his opinion, could not result to the mus-

keteer's advantage, and also because he felt confident that my uncle would succeed in removing the tinsel of the two noblemen and mortifying their pride.

While waiting for dinner, Benjamin went to take a walk in the village. As he left M. Minxit's house, he saw a pair of officers walking in the middle of the street. They looked as though they would not have turned out of their way for a mail-coach, and the peasants stared at them in amazement. My uncle was not a man to pay any attention to so small a matter. But as he passed them, he heard one of them say very distinctly to his companion, "Say, that is the queer chap who wants to marry Mademoiselle Minxit." My uncle's first impulse was to ask them why they thought him so queer. But he reflected that it would be scarcely becoming to make a spectacle of himself before the inhabitants of Corvol, though he generally cared very little for the proprieties. So he acted as if he had heard nothing, and walked into the house of his friend, the notary.

"I have just met two creatures in the street," he said, "who looked like lobsters with feathers on them. They almost insulted me. Can you tell me to what family of the crustacea these queer fellows belong?"

"Oh, the devil!" said the notary, somewhat frightened. "Don't try your jokes on those men. One of them, M. de Pont-Cassé, is the most dan-


M. de Pont Casse

gerous duellist of our age, and not one of the many who have taken the duelling-ground against him has returned from it whole."

"We shall see," said my uncle.

When the village clock struck two, he took his friend, the notary, by the arm, and went back with him to M. Minxit's. The company was already gathered in the parlour, and they were only waiting for them to sit down at table.

The two country squires, who acted in the presence of these rustics as though they were in a conquered country, monopolised the conversation from the start. M. de Pont-Cassé incessantly kept twirling his moustache, and talking of the court, of his duels, and of his amorous exploits. Arabella, who had never heard such magnificent things, was very much taken with his conversation. My uncle noticed it, but, as Mademoiselle Minxit was indifferent to him, he thought it none of his concern. M. de Pont-Cassé, piqued at his failure to produce an effect upon Benjamin, addressed some remarks to him that bordered on insolence. But my uncle, sure of his strength, disdained to pay any attention to them, and occupied himself exclusively with his glass and his plate. M. Minxit was scandalised by the nonchalant voracity of his champion.

"Don't you understand what M. de Pont-Cassé means?" cried the good man. "What are you thinking of, Benjamin?"

"Of the dinner, Monsieur Minxit. And I advise

you to do the same. Isn't that what you invited us for?"

M. de Pont-Cassé had too much pride to believe that he could be ignored. He took my uncle's silence for a confession of his inferiority and began a more direct attack.

"I have heard you called de Rathery," he said to Benjamin. "I used to know, or rather I have seen —for one does not make the acquaintance of such people—a Rathery among the king's hostlers. Was he a relative of yours, perhaps?"

My uncle pricked up his ears like a horse struck with a whip.

"M. de Pont-Cassé," he answered, "the Ratherys have never made themselves court servants in any livery whatsoever. The Ratherys have proud souls, Monsieur. They will eat no bread except what they have earned. And it is they who, with a few millions of others, pay the wages of those flunkeys of all colours who go under the name of courtiers."

There was a solemn silence in the company, and everyone gave my uncle an approving look.

"Monsieur Minxit," he added, "may I have another piece of that hare-pie? It is excellent. I wager that the hare of which it is made was not a nobleman."

"Monsieur," said M. de Pont-Cassé's friend, assuming a martial attitude, "what did you mean by that remark about a hare?"

"I meant that a nobleman would not be any good in a pie, that's all," answered my uncle coldly.

"Gentlemen," said M. Minxit, "it is understood of course that your discussions are not to overstep the limits of pleasantry."

"Of course," said M. de Pont-Cassé. "Strictly speaking, the remarks of M. de Rathery are such as to constitute an offence to two officers of the king, who have not the honour to be of the plebeian class like himself. From his red coat and his big sword, I at first took him for one of ours, and I still tremble, like the man who came near taking a serpent for an eel, when I think that I came near fraternising with him. It was only the long queue dangling over his shoulders that undeceived me."

"Monsieur de Pont-Cassé," cried M. Minxit, "I will not allow——"

"Let him alone, my good Monsieur Minxit," said my uncle. "Insolence is the weapon of those who cannot handle the flexible rod of wit. I know that I have no occasion to reproach myself for my conduct toward M. de Pont-Cassé, for I have not yet paid any attention to him."

"Good," said M. Minxit.

The musketeer, who prided himself on being a very witty fellow, did not become discouraged. He knew that in the combats of wit as well as in those of the sword fortune is fickle.

"Monsieur Rathery," he continued, "Monsieur surgeon Rathery, do you know that there is a closer

analogy between our two professions than you think? I would bet my sorrel horse against your red coat that you have killed more people this year than I did in my last campaign."

"You would win, Monsieur de Pont-Cassé," replied my uncle coolly. "I have had the misfortune to lose a patient this year. He died of a carbuncle yesterday."

"Bravo, Benjamin! Hurrah for the people!" cried M. Minxit, unable any longer to restrain his joy. "You see, my nobleman, the people of wit are not all in court."

"You are the best proof of that, Monsieur Minxit," answered the musketeer, disguising the mortification at his defeat under a serene countenance.

Meantime, all the guests, except the two noblemen, held out their glasses and clinked them cordially with Benjamin's.

"To the health of Benjamin Rathery, the avenger of the people, the misunderstood and the insulted!" cried M. Minxit.

The dinner lasted far into the evening. My uncle noticed that Mademoiselle Minxit had disappeared soon after the departure of M. de Pont-Cassé. But he was too much preoccupied with the praises showered upon him to pay any attention to his fiancée. About ten o'clock he took leave of M. Minxit. He escorted him to the end of the village, and made him promise that the marriage should

Rathery on his Way to
Sembert and how he overbears Arabella
with her Lover

take place within a week. As Benjamin approached a point opposite the Trucy mill, a sound of conversation reached his ears, and he thought he could distinguish the voices of Arabella and her illustrious adorer.

Out of regard for Mademoiselle Minxit, Benjamin did not wish to surprise her on a country road with a musketeer at that hour of the night. He hid himself under the branches of a large walnut-tree, and waited for the two lovers to pass on before continuing on his way. He had no desire whatever to steal Arabella's little secrets, but the wind brought them to him, and he had to overhear them in spite of himself.

"I know a way of making him pack off," said M. de Pont-Cassé. "I will send him a challenge."

"I know him," answered Arabella. "He is a man of ungovernable pride, and even if he were sure of being killed on the spot, he would accept."

"So much the better. Then I'll rid you of him forever."

"Yes. But in the first place I don't want to be an accomplice in a murder, and secondly my father loves that man perhaps more than he loves me, his only daughter. I will never consent to your killing my father's best friend."

"You are charming with your scruples, Arabella. I have killed more than one for a word that sounded bad in my ears, and this plebeian, with his savage wit, has taken a cruel revenge on me. I should not

like everybody at court to know what was said to-night at your father's table. But to comply with your wishes, I will content myself with crippling him. If I should cut the cord of his kneepan, for instance, you would have sufficient excuse to refuse him your hand."

"But suppose you should fall yourself, Hector?" said Mademoiselle Minxit in her tenderest voice.

"I who have sent to Hades the best swordsmen of the army—the brave Bellerive, the terrible Desrivières, the formidable Châteaufort—I fall by a surgeon's rapier! You insult me by entertaining such a doubt, my beautiful Arabella. I am as sure of my sword as you of your needles. Don't you know that? Tell me the place where you would like me to strike him, and I will be delighted to serve you."

The voices were lost in the distance. My uncle left his hiding-place, and calmly resumed his journey to Clamecy, revolving over in his mind the course he should pursue.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT MY UNCLE SAID TO HIMSELF REGARDING DUELLING

"M. DE PONT-CASSE wants to cripple me. He promised Mademoiselle Minxit that he would, and a valiant officer of the Guards is not the man to break his word.

"Let me think what I am to do in the circumstances. Shall I let myself be crippled by M. de Pont-Cassé with the docility of a dog under the scalpel, or shall I decline the honour he graciously intends to bestow upon me? It is to M. de Pont-Cassé's interest that I should go upon crutches. I know it is, but I don't exactly see why I should do him that favour. Mademoiselle Minxit makes very little difference to me even though she is equipped with a dowry of one hundred thousand francs. But I care very much for the symmetry of my figure, and without flattery to myself I am good-looking enough for this concern of mine not to seem ridiculous. You say a man challenged to a duel must fight. But please tell me, in what code of laws do you find it written? In the Pandects, in Charlemagne's Capitularies, in the ten commandments, or in the canons

of the Church? And in the first place, M. de Pont-Cassé, are you and I an even match? You are a musketeer and I am a doctor. You are an artist in fencing, and I scarcely know how to handle anything but the bistoury or the lancet. You feel no more scruple, it seems, in depriving a man of a limb than in tearing off a fly's wing, while I have a horror of blood, especially arterial blood. Wouldn't it be as ridiculous for me to accept your challenge as if I were to try to walk a tight rope upon the challenge of an acrobat, or try to swim across an arm of the sea upon the challenge of a swimming teacher? And even though the chances between us were equal, one reckons on something to be gained in such affairs. Now, if I kill you, what shall I gain? And if I am killed by you, then what shall I gain? You see, in either case it would be a bad bargain for me. But, you repeat, where a man is challenged to a duel he must fight. What, if a highwayman stops me at the edge of a wood, I have no hesitation in making my escape with the aid of my good legs; but when a drawing-room murderer sticks a challenge under my nose, must I feel myself in duty bound to throw myself upon the point of his sword?

"When an individual whose acquaintance you have made from having accidentally stepped on his toe, writes: 'Monsieur, be present at such and such an hour, at such and such a spot, so that I may have the satisfaction of killing you to atone for the insult you offered me,' one must, in your opinion, submit to his

orders, and also take good care not to keep him waiting. Strange! There are men who would not risk a thousand francs to save their friend's honour or their father's life, who yet risk their own life in a duel on account of an ambiguous word or a side glance. But what is life? Isn't it the one blessing without which all others are of little consequence? Or is it a rag to be thrown to the passing rag-picker, or a worn coin to be tossed to the blind man singing beneath your window? They ask me to stake my life in a game of swords with M. de Pont-Cassé, whereas, if I should stake a hundred francs in a game of cards with him, my reputation would be ruined and the poorest cobbler would not have me for a son-in-law. Then, according to their views, am I to be more prodigal of my life than of my money? And must I, who pride myself on being a philosopher, regulate my convictions according to those of such casuists?

"As a matter of fact, who constitutes this public which takes it upon itself to judge our actions? Grocers who use false scales, cloth merchants who give false measure, tailors who make dresses for their children out of their customers' goods, men of property who live by usury, mothers of families who have lovers; in short, a heap of crickets and grasshoppers who know not what they sing, simpletons who say yes and no without knowing why, a tribunal of blockheads incapable of giving reasons for their decisions. It would be a fine thing in me if I, a

doctor, should send a patient suffering with hydrophobia to Ardennes to kneel at the shrine of St. Hubert because those fools believe the great saint can cure the rabies. And then observe those who pride themselves on being the wisest, and you will see how illogical they are. The philosophers wax indignant over the poor wives in India who throw themselves alive, decked in all their finery, on their husbands' funeral-piles. And when two men cut each other's throats for a mere nothing, they glorify them for their bravery.

"You say I am a coward when I have the good sense to decline a challenge. But what do you take cowardice to be? If cowardice means avoiding needless danger, where will you find a courageous man? Who of you remains calmly dreaming in bed when the roof is in flames over your head? Who does not call the doctor in when he is seriously ill? Who does not clutch at the bushes on the banks when he falls into the river? Once more, what is the public? A coward preaching bravery to others. Suppose M. de Pont-Cassé were to challenge, not me, Benjamin Rathery, but the public to fight a duel, how many in the crowd would have the courage to accept?

"Besides, has a philosopher any other public to consider than men of thought and superior intelligence? And don't men of intelligence consider the duel the most absurd, the most barbarous of prejudices? What does the logic learned in the duelling

academy prove? A well-delivered sword thrust is a magnificent argument, is it not? Parry tierce, parry quarte—now you can demonstrate anything you like. A great pity that when the pope declared that the revolution of the earth was a heretical doctrine, Galileo did not think of challenging His Holiness to a duel to prove the truth of his discovery.

"In the Middle Ages there was at least a genuine reason for duelling. It sprang from the religious beliefs. Our grandparents thought God too just to allow an innocent man to fall under the blows of a guilty man, and the issue of the combat was regarded as a decree from on high. But how can we, who, thank Heaven, have recovered from those absurd ideas, justify the duel? And what purpose can it serve now?

"You dread the charge of cowardice if you decline a challenge. But how about those wretches who make murder a profession and challenge you because they feel sure of killing you? What of their courage? How courageous is the butcher who kills a sheep with its feet bound, or the huntsman who fires at a hare in the warren or at a bird singing on the branch? I have known many of these people to be too timid to have a tooth pulled. And how many of them would dare to stand up against the will of the man upon whom they are dependent to satisfy their consciences? I can understand why the cannibalistic Southsea Islander kills men of his own colour. He roasts them nice and brown and eats

them. But you, friend duellist, with what sauce will you eat the body of the man you challenge after you have killed him? You are guiltier than the murderer sentenced to death by hanging. He at least was driven to murder by poverty. In doing what he did he may have been moved by a sentiment praiseworthy in itself but deplorable in its consequences. But you—what motive puts the sword in your hand? Is it vanity, or an appetite for blood, or curiosity to see how a man writhes in the death-agony? Can't you picture to yourself the wife throwing herself half-crazed with grief on her husband's body, the orphaned children crying in the house draped with black, the mother praying God to take her instead of her son in the coffin? Yet it is you who have acted like a tiger and caused all that misery! You want to kill us if we don't recognise you as a man of honour! But you are not worthy of the name of man. You are a brute thirsting for blood, a viper stinging for the mere pleasure of useless killing. And even the viper does not attack creatures of its own kind. When your adversary has fallen, you kneel in the blood-stained mud, you try to staunch the wounds you made, you act as if you were his best friend. Then why did you kill him, wretch? What good are your pangs of conscience? Will your tears replace the blood that you have shed? You, fashionable assassin, correct murderer, you find men to shake hands with you, mothers of families to invite you to their parties. Women

who faint at the sight of the executioner are ready to press their lips to yours and let your head rest on their bosom. But these men and women, to be sure, judge things only by their names. If a man is killed by what is called murder, they are horrified. If he is killed by what is called a duel, they applaud. After all, how much time have you in which to enjoy this applause? Up on high 'Murderer' is inscribed after your name. On your brow is a blood-stain which all the kisses of your mistresses will not remove. No judge on earth has sentenced you; but up in heaven there is a judge awaiting you who will not be fooled by talk of honour. I for my part am a doctor, not to kill, but to cure, do you hear, M. de Pont-Cassé? If you have too much blood in your veins, I can rid you of some, but only with the point of my lancet."

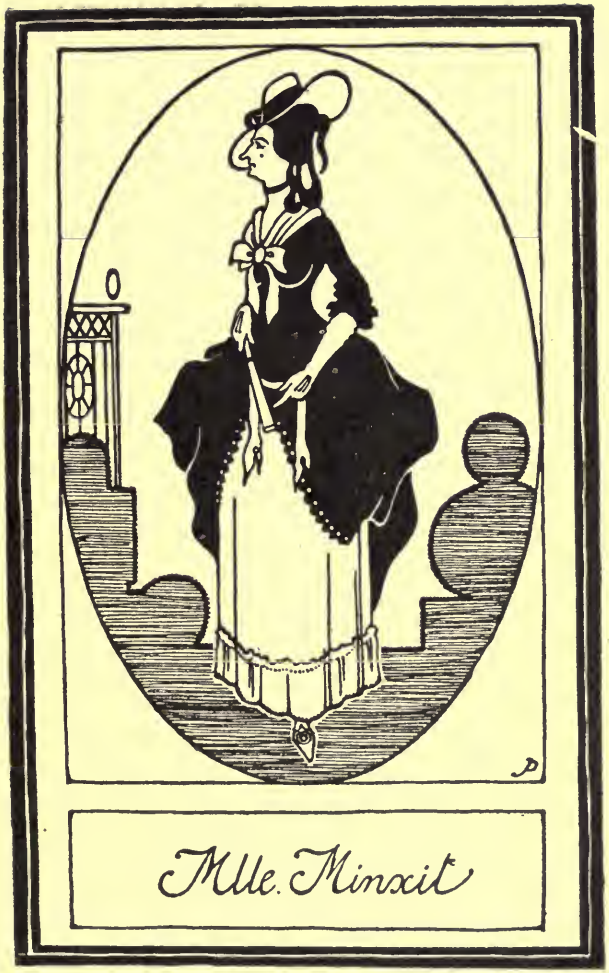
Thus my uncle reasoned with himself. We shall soon see how he put his doctrines into practice.

Night does not always bring good counsel. My uncle rose the next day determined not to yield to M. de Pont-Cassé's provocation, and to end the adventure as soon as possible, he started for Corvol that very day. Perhaps he had not breakfasted, or did not perspire freely enough, or was suffering from indigestion of the day before. However that might be, he felt an unusual melancholy creeping over him in spite of himself. In a very pensive mood, like Racine's Hippolyte, he mounted the terraced slopes of the mountain of Beaumont. His noble

sword, which generally hung so straight at his side, its point threatening the ground, now drooped mournfully, as if sharing its master's thoughts. His three-cornered hat, which usually sat so proudly on his head, tilted a bit to the left, now hung anxiously on his neck, as if in a melancholy mood, and his bright eyes were dimmed. It moved him to look down on the valley of the Beuvron, stretching away stiff and shivering at his feet, at those large walnut trees in mourning which looked like huge polyps, at those tall poplars with but a few red leaves on them left, at the flocks of ravens sometimes fluttering about their tops, at that wild copse browned by the frost, at the dark stream that flowed toward the mill-wheels between banks of snow; at the round tower of La Postaillerie, grey and misty as though a column made of clouds, at the old feudal castle of Pressure, which seemed to crouch among the brown reeds of its moats like a creature in a fever, at the village chimneys with the thin light smoke, like a man's breath when he blows on his fingers, curling up from them. The tic-tac of the mill, that friend with which he had conversed so often on his way back from Corvol in the fine moonlight nights of autumn, had a sinister sound. It seemed to jerk out:

"Carrying your sword, my brave,
You are walking to your grave."

To which my uncle replied:


Mlle. Minxit

"You babbler, for God's sake, be still!
I do whatever is my will.
And if I die before my turn,
It's no one else's damn concern."

There was something sickly about the weather. Huge white clouds, driven by the north wind, crept clumsily across the sky, like a wounded swan. The snow was as grey as the day, and the horizon was girdled in by a line of fog hanging on the mountains. My uncle felt that he never again would see that landscape, now in its winter shroud, lighted up by the gay spring sunshine or festooned with flowers.

M. Minxit was absent when my uncle arrived at Corvol. He entered the drawing-room, where he found M. de Pont-Cassé seated upon a sofa beside Arabella. Without paying any attention to his betrothed's pouting or to the musketeer's provocative manner, Benjamin threw himself into an arm-chair, crossed his legs, and laid his hat on a chair, like a man in no hurry to go. After talking for a while of M. Minxit's health, the probabilities of a thaw, and the grippe, Arabella turned silent, and my uncle could get nothing out of her beyond a few sharp, shrill monosyllables, like the notes that a learner elicits from his clarinette with difficulty and at rare intervals. M. de Pont-Cassé walked up and down the drawing-room, twirling his moustache, his big spurs clanking on the wooden floor, apparently pondering how to pick a quarrel with my uncle.

Benjamin divined his intentions, but pretended

not to notice him, and picked up a book lying on a sofa. At first he contented himself with turning over the leaves, watching M. de Pont-Cassé out of the corner of his eye; but as it was a medical work, he soon became absorbed in its interesting contents and forgot the musketeer. M. de Pont-Cassé, however, decided to bring things to a crisis. He halted before my uncle, and said, surveying him from head to foot:

"Do you know, Monsieur, you pay very long visits here?"

"It seems to me," answered my uncle, "that you came before I did."

"And also very frequent," added the musketeer.

"I assure you, Monsieur," replied my uncle, "they would be much less frequent if I expected to find you here each time."

"If you come here on Mademoiselle Minxit's account," continued the musketeer, "she begs you through me to rid her of your long person."

"If Mademoiselle Minxit, who is not a musketeer, had any orders to give me, she would give them more politely. At any rate, Monsieur, you will allow me to wait before retiring until she has spoken to me herself and until I have interviewed M. Minxit."

And my uncle went on with his reading.

The officer took several more turns in the drawing-room, then stood himself opposite my uncle and said:

"I pray you, Monsieur, kindly interrupt your

reading a moment, I have a word to say to you."

"Since it is only one word," said my uncle, turning down the page he was reading, "I can spend a moment listening to you."

M. de Pont-Cassé was infuriated by Benjamin's coolness.

"Monsieur Rathery," said he, "if you do not leave this instant by the door, I will put you out through the window."

"Really! Well, I, Monsieur, shall be politer than you. I shall put you out by the door."

And taking the officer by the waist, Benjamin carried him to the head of the steps and locked the door behind him.

Mademoiselle Minxit sat there trembling, and my uncle said:

"Do not be too much afraid of me. I was justified in treating that man that way. He has insulted me repeatedly. Besides," he added, bitterly, "I shall not embarrass you long with my long person. I am not one of those dowry-hunters who take a woman from the arms of the man she loves and keep her fastened to their bedstead. Heaven has granted every young girl her share of love. She has the right to choose the man upon whom she wishes to bestow it. No one has the right to pour the white pearls of her youth into the street and trample them under foot. God forbid that low greed for money should lead me to do anything bad. So far I have

been a poor man. I know the joys of poverty, and I am ignorant of the miseries of wealth. Probably I should be making a bad bargain if I exchanged my wild jolly indigence for ill-tempered opulence. At any rate, I should not like a woman who detested me to bring me opulence. I beg you to tell me in all sincerity whether you love M. de Pont-Cassé. I must have your reply in order to determine my conduct toward you and your father."

Mademoiselle Minxit was moved.

"Had I known you before M. de Pont-Cassé, perhaps you would be the one I love."

"Mademoiselle," interrupted my uncle, "it is not politeness, but sincerity that I ask of you. Tell me frankly, do you think you would be happier with M. de Pont-Cassé than with me?"

"What shall I say, Monsieur Rathery?" answered Arabella. "A woman is not always happy with the man she loves, but she is always unhappy with the man she does not love."

"I thank you, Mademoiselle. Now I know what I have to do. Will you kindly order some lunch for me? The stomach is an egoist with little sympathy for the tribulations of the heart."

My uncle ate as Alexander or Cæsar might have eaten on the eve of battle. He did not want to await M. Minxit's return. He had not the courage to face his mournful look when he should learn that he, Benjamin, whom he treated almost as a son, declined to be his son-in-law. He

preferred to inform him of his heroic determination by letter.

At some distance from the town he saw M. de Pont-Cassé's friend walking up and down the road majestically. The musketeer advanced to meet him, and said:

"Monsieur, you keep those who demand reparation of you waiting a very long time."

"I was having lunch," answered my uncle.

"In behalf of M. de Pont-Cassé, I have to hand you a letter to which he has charged me to bring back a reply."

"Let us see what the worthy nobleman has to say to me. 'Monsieur, in view of the enormity of the outrage you inflicted upon me'—What outrage? I carried him from the drawing-room to the steps. I wish some one would outrage me the same way by carrying me to Clamecy—'I consent to cross swords with you.'—The great soul! He condescends to grant me the favour of being crippled by him! If that is not magnanimity, then I don't know what magnanimity is!—'I hope you will show yourself worthy of the honour I do you by accepting.'—Why, of course! It would be base ingratitude on my part to refuse. You may say to your friend that if he kills me like the brave Desrivières, the intrepid Bellerive, etc., I wish them to inscribe my tombstone in letters of gold with, 'Here lies Benjamin Rathery, killed in a duel by a nobleman.'—'Postscript.'—Just see, your friend's note has a postscript.—'I

will await you to-morrow at ten o'clock in the morning at the place known as Chaume-des-Fertiaux.'— At the place known as Chaume-des-Fertiaux. Upon my honour, a process-server could not have drawn it up better. But Chaume-des-Fertiaux is a good league from Clamecy. I, who have no sorrel horse, haven't got the time to go so far to fight. If your friend will condescend to meet me at the place known as Croix-des-Michelins, I shall have the honour to await him there."

"And where is this Croix-des-Michelins?"

"On the Corvol road, beyond the faubourg of Beuvron. Your friend must be a sour sort of person if he does not like the spot. From there you get a view for a king to enjoy. In the foreground are the hills of Sembert with their terraces loaded with vines, their big bald pates and the forest of Frace on their necks. At another season of the year the view would be still finer, but unfortunately I cannot revive springtime with a breath. At the foot of the hills lies the town, with its thousand curls of smoke, pressed between the two rivers and climbing the steep slopes of Crot-Pinçon like a hunted man. If your friend has any talent for drawing, he can adorn his album with a picture of this view. From up between the great gables, that in their moss coverings look like pieces of crimson velvet, rises the tower of Saint Martin, turreted and decorated with its stone jewels. The tower in itself is worth a cathedral. Alongside extends the old basilica, with

great bold arched counter-forts on the right and the left. Your friend will instinctively compare it to a gigantic spider. Toward the south run the bluish mountains of Morvan, like a succession of sombre clouds. Then——"

"Oh, enough of your joking, please! I did not come here to have you show me a magic lantern. To-morrow, then, at Croix-des-Michelins."

"To-morrow? One moment, the affair is not so pressing that it cannot be postponed. To-morrow I am going to Dornecy to taste a cask of old wine that Page is thinking of buying. He relies on my judgment as to quality and price, and you must realise that for your friend's sake I cannot fail in the duties of friendship. Day after to-morrow I am invited to lunch in town. I cannot, in decency, give the preference to a duel. Thursday I am to tap a patient of mine who has the dropsy. As your friend wishes to cripple me, it would be impossible for me to perform the operation afterward, and Doctor Arnout would make a bad job of it. For Friday—oh, yes, Friday's a fast day. I believe I have no engagement for Friday, and I know of nothing to prevent me from being at your friend's disposal."

"We are obliged to comply with your desires; at least, you will do me the favour to bring a second with you, in order to save me from playing the tiresome rôle of spectator."

"Why not? I know you are friends, you and M. de Pont-Cassé, and I should be sorry to sepa-

rate you. I will bring my barber, if he has time and if it suits you."

"Insolent fellow!" said the musketeer.

"This barber," answered my uncle, "is not a man to be despised. He has a rapier long enough to spit four musketeers upon. Besides, if you prefer, I will willingly take his place."

"I take note of your words," said the musketeer.

My uncle, as soon as he rose the next day, went in search of Machecourt's inkstand, and began to indite a magnificent epistle to M. Minxit in his finest style and best penmanship, explaining why he could not become his son-in-law. My grandfather, who was given the privilege of reading it, told me it would have made a jailer weep. If the exclamation point had not then existed, my uncle would certainly have invented it. The letter had been in the post-office scarcely a quarter of an hour, when M. Minxit arrived at my grandmother's in person, accompanied by the sergeant, who was himself accompanied by two masks, two foils, and his honourable poodle.

Benjamin was just then breakfasting with Machecourt off a herring and the patrimonial white wine of Choulot.

"Welcome, Monsieur Minxit!" cried Benjamin. "Wouldn't you like a bit of this fish?"

"Do you take me for a thrasher?"

"And you, sergeant?"

"I have given up such things since I had the honour to join the band."

"But your dog, what would he think of this head?"

"I thank you for him, but I believe he doesn't care for sea-fish."

"I admit a herring is not as good as pike boiled in——"

"And how about carp, especially carp cooked with Burgundy wine?" interrupted M. Minxit.

"To be sure, to be sure," said Benjamin. "Or hare that you yourself have prepared. However, herring is excellent when you haven't anything else. By the way, I mailed a letter to you a quarter of an hour ago. You probably have not received it yet, Monsieur Minxit?"

"No," said M. Minxit, "but I come to bring you the answer. You say Arabella does not love you, and for that reason you will not marry her."

"M. Rathery is right," said the sergeant. "I had a bed-fellow who couldn't bear me. And I couldn't bear him. Our household was a regular police-station. When one of us wanted turnips in the soup, the other one put carrots in. At the canteen, if I asked for currant wine, he sent for gin. We quarrelled over the best place to keep our guns in. If he had a kick to give, it was my poodle that was sure to get it, and if a flea bit him, he insisted it came from poor Azor. Just think, we once fought in the moonlight because he wanted to sleep on the right side of the bed, and I insisted on his taking the left side. The only thing I could do to get

rid of him was to send him to the hospital."

"You did quite right, sergeant," said my uncle. "When people do not know how to live in this world, we sentence them to the other forever."

"There is some truth in what the sergeant says," said M. Minxit. "To be loved is more than to be rich. It means happiness. Consequently, I do not disapprove of your scruples, my dear Benjamin. All I ask of you is that you continue to come to Corvol, as you have been doing. Your not wanting to be my son-in-law is no reason for ceasing to be my friend. You need no longer pay Arabella pretty compliments, fetch water for sprinkling her flowers, wax enthusiastic over the ruffles she embroiders for me and over the superiority of her cream-cheeses. We will breakfast together, dine together, philosophise together, laugh together. That's the best pastime conceivable. You are fond of truffles. My pantry shall always smell of them. You have a fondness for *volnay*—a fondness I do not share—but I shall always have some in my wine-cellar. If you feel like going hunting, I will buy you a double-barrelled gun and a brace of hounds. And inside of three months, I am convinced, Arabella will be sick of her nobleman and head over heels in love with you. Does the arrangement suit you? Yes or no. You know I am not fond of fine phrases."

"Well, yes, Monsieur Minxit," said my uncle.

"Very well, I expected nothing less from your friendship. And now are you going to fight a duel?"

"Who the devil told you that?" cried my uncle. "I know that urines hide nothing from you. Have you examined my urine without my knowledge?"

"Enough of your poor jokes. You are to fight M. de Pont-Cassé. You are to meet him three days from now at Croix-des-Michelins, and in case you rid me of M. de Pont-Cassé, the other musketeer will take his place. You see I am well informed."

"What, Benjamin!" cried Machecourt, his face as pale as his plate.

"What, you wicked creature," my grandmother also put in, "you are to fight a duel?"

"Listen to me, Machecourt, and you, my dear sister, and you too, Monsieur Minxit. Yes, I am going to fight a duel with M. de Pont-Cassé. My mind is made up. So save yourself remonstrances. They would only bore me without making me change my mind."

"I have not come," answered M. Minxit, "to try to prevent the duel. On the contrary, I have come to show you a way to victory, and, what is more, to make your name famous throughout the country. The sergeant knows a superb thrust. In one hour he could disarm the entire guild of fencing-masters. As soon as he has drunk a glass of white wine, he shall give you your first lesson. I will leave him with you until Friday, and will stay here myself to watch you and keep you from wasting your time in the taverns."

"But what am I to do with your thrust," asked my

uncle. "Besides, if it is infallible, what glory would there be in my triumphing over the vicomte? In rendering Achilles invulnerable, Homer deprived him of all the merit of his valour. I have thought the matter over. I don't mean to use the sword at all."

"What! You don't mean to fight with a pistol, you fool you! If M. Arthus were your opponent, very well. He is as big as a wardrobe."

"I don't mean to fight either with a pistol or a sword. I wish to serve these bullies with a duel of my own kind. You'll see, but I want to surprise you."

"Very well, but learn my thrust all the same. It is a weapon that won't be a nuisance to you, and one never knows what one may need."

My uncle's room was in the second story, over Machecourt's. After breakfast, he shut himself up in it with the sergeant and M. Minxit to begin his fencing-lessons. But the lesson was not of long duration. At Benjamin's first attack Machecourt's worm-eaten floor gave way under his feet, and he went through up to his arm-pits.

The sergeant, amazed at the sudden disappearance of his pupil, remained standing with his left arm gently curved on a level with his ear and his right arm extended in the attitude of a man about to make a thrust. As for M. Minxit, he was seized with such a desire to laugh that he came near suffocating.

Rathery on his
Way Home and the interrupted
Fencing-lesson

"Where is Rathery?" he cried. "What has become of Rathery? Sergeant, what have you done with Rathery?"

"I see M. Rathery's head," answered the sergeant, "but the devil take me if I know where his legs are."

Gaspard happened at that moment to be alone in his father's room. At first he was somewhat astonished at the abrupt arrival of his uncle's legs. Then he burst out into wild shouts of laughter, which mingled with M. Minxit's.

"Hello, there, Gaspard," cried Benjamin, who heard him.

"Hello, there, my dear uncle," answered Gaspard.

"Please place your father's leather arm-chair under my feet, Gaspard."

"I have no right to," replied the little rogue. "My mother won't allow anybody to stand on it."

"Will you bring me that arm-chair, you damned choir-boy, you!"

"Take off your shoes, and I will bring it to you."

"How do you expect me to take off my shoes? My feet are in the first story, and my hands are in the second."

"Well, give me a franc to pay me for my trouble."

"I will give you a franc and a half, my good Gaspard, but the arm-chair at once, I beg of you. My arms will soon separate from my shoulders."

"Credit is dead," said Gaspard. "Give me the franc and a half at once. Otherwise, no arm-chair."

Fortunately Machecourt came in at that point. He gave Gaspard a kick, and put an end to his brother-in-law's suspension. Benjamin went to finish his fencing-lesson at Page's, and he proved so apt a pupil that in two hours' time he was as skilful as his teacher.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW MY UNCLE THRICE DISARMED M. DE PONT-CASSE

THE dawn, a dismal February dawn, had scarcely thrown its leaden tints on the walls of his room, when my uncle was up. He dressed himself groping about for his things, and softly descended the stairs, particularly fearful of waking his sister. But just as he reached the vestibule, he felt a woman's hand on his shoulder.

"What, dear sister," he cried, just a bit scared, "awake already?"

"Say rather not asleep yet, Benjamin. I wanted to say good-bye to you before you go, perhaps the last good-bye, Benjamin. Have you a conception of how I am suffering at the thought that you are leaving this house full of life, youth, and hope, and may come back on the arms of your friends, with a sword through your body? Is your mind quite made up? Before coming to a decision, did you think of the grief your death would cause in this unfortunate house? For you, when your last drop of blood has gone, all will be over, but many months, many years will pass before our grief is stilled, and the drops of resin will long have dried on the cross over

your grave when our tears will still be flowing."

My uncle wanted to go away without answering, and perhaps he was weeping. My grandmother caught him by the skirt of his coat.

"Then be off to your murderous rendezvous, you brute you," she cried. "Do not keep M. de Pont-Cassé waiting. Perhaps honour requires you to start without kissing your sister. But at least take this relic. Cousin Guillaumot lent it to me. It may guard you from the dangers you are going into so recklessly."

My uncle thrust the relic into his pocket and slipped away.

He hastened to awaken M. Minxit at his hotel. They picked up Page and Arthus in passing, and all went to breakfast together in a wine-shop at the extremity of Beuvron. My uncle, if he was to fall, did not wish to depart this life with an empty stomach. He said that a soul appearing before God's judgment seat after a good long draught feels more encouraged and pleads its cause better than a poor soul with nothing but sweetened water inside of it. The sergeant was present at breakfast, and at dessert my uncle asked him to carry a table, a box, and two chairs to Croix-des-Michelins. He said he needed them for his duel. He also asked him to build a big fire there with vine-poles from the neighbouring vineyard. Then he ordered coffee.

M. de Pont-Cassé and his friend put in appearance punctually.

The sergeant did the honours of the bivouac to the best of his ability.

"Gentlemen," said he, "be good enough to sit down and warm yourselves. M. Rathery begs you to excuse him if he keeps you waiting a short while. He is breakfasting with his seconds, and will be at your disposition in a few minutes."

Benjamin arrived a quarter of an hour later, holding Arthus and M. Minxit by the arm and singing lustily:

"By God, a sorry soldier's he
Who never had a jolly spree."

My uncle saluted his two adversaries graciously.

"Monsieur," said M. de Pont-Cassé, haughtily, "we have been waiting for you twenty minutes."

"The sergeant must have explained the cause of our delay. I hope you find it a legitimate one."

"What excuses you is that you are not a nobleman, and this is probably the first time you have any dealings with a nobleman."

"What do you expect? We plebeians are accustomed to take coffee after each meal, and because you call yourself Vicomte de Pont-Cassé, that is no reason why we should depart from our custom. You see, coffee is a wholesome tonic. It stimulates the brain agreeably and promotes thinking. If you have not taken coffee this morning, the weapons are not equal, and I am not sure whether my conscience will let me measure myself against you."

"Make your jokes, Monsieur; laugh while you can. But I tell you, he laughs best who laughs last."

"Monsieur," rejoined Benjamin, "I am not joking when I say coffee is a tonic. That is the opinion of several celebrated doctors, and I myself give it as a stimulant in certain diseases."

"Monsieur!"

"And your sorrel horse? I am surprised not to see him here. Is there anything wrong with him?"

"Monsieur," said the second musketeer, "enough of your jokes. You have not forgotten why you have come here, have you?"

"Ah, there you are, number two. Delighted to renew our acquaintance. Of course, I have not forgotten what I came here for, and the proof," he added, pointing to the table on which the box was placed, "is that I have made preparations to receive you."

"What's this juggler's apparatus for in a duel?"

"I don't mean to fight with the sword."

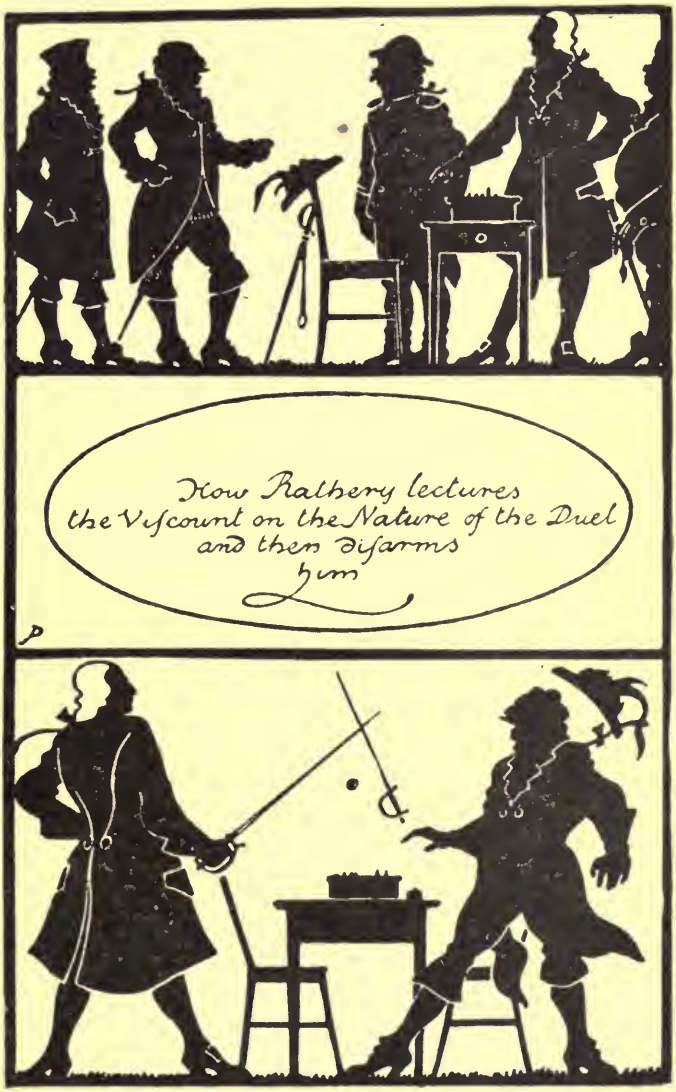
"Monsieur," said M. de Pont-Cassé, "I am the insulted party. I have the choice of weapons. I choose the sword."

"It is I, Monsieur, who was insulted first; I will not yield my privilege, and I choose chess."

He opened the box the sergeant had brought, took out a chess-board, and invited the nobleman to take his place at the table.

M. de Pont-Cassé turned pale with anger.

"Are you trying to make a fool of me?" he cried.



How Rathery lectures
the Viscount on the Nature of the Duel
and then disarms
him

"Not at all," said my uncle. "Every duel is a game in which two men stake their lives. Why shouldn't the game be played with chess as well as with the sword? However, if you doubt your strength at chess, I am ready to play you a game of *écarté* or *triomphe*. In five points, if you like, without a return game or a rubber. In that way it will be over soon."

"I have come here," said M. de Pont-Cassé, scarcely able to contain himself, "not to stake my life like a bottle of beer, but to defend it with my sword."

"I understand," said my uncle. "You are a better swordsman than I am, and you hope to have an advantage over me, who never take mine in hand except to put it at my side. Is that a nobleman's fairness? If a mower should propose to fight you with the scythe, or a thrasher with a flail, would you accept, I ask you?"

"You will fight with the sword," cried M. de Pont-Cassé, beside himself. "Otherwise——" he added, lifting his riding-whip.

"Otherwise what?" said my uncle.

"Otherwise I will cut you across the face with my riding-whip."

"You know how I answer your threats," retorted Benjamin. "No, Monsieur, this duel shall not be carried through as you hope. If you persist in your unfair obstinacy, I shall believe and declare that you have speculated on your ruffian's skill, that

you have set a trap for me, that you have come here, not to risk your life against mine, but to cripple me, do you understand, M. de Pont-Cassé? And I shall hold you for a coward, yes, for a coward, my nobleman, for a coward, yes, for a coward."

My uncle's words vibrated between his lips like a rattling window-pane.

The nobleman could endure it no longer. He drew his sword and rushed upon Benjamin, and it would have been all up with Benjamin if the poodle had not changed the direction of his sword by throwing himself upon M. de Pont-Cassé. The sergeant having called off his dog, my uncle cried:

"Gentleman, I call you to witness that if I fight, it is to save this man from committing a murder."

Brandishing his sword, he sustained his adversary's impetuous attack without retiring a step. The sergeant, seeing no sign of his thrust, stamped on the grass like a war-horse tied to a tree and twisted his wrist till he nearly threw it out of joint to indicate to Benjamin the motion he ought to make in order to disarm his man. M. de Pont-Cassé, exasperated at the unexpected resistance, lost his *sang-froid* and along with it his murderous skill. He no longer tried to parry, only to pierce his adversary with his sword.

"Monsieur de Pont-Cassé," said my uncle, "you would have done better to play chess. You never parry. I could kill you at any moment."

"Kill me, Monsieur," said the musketeer. "That is what you are here for."

"I prefer to disarm you," said my uncle, and swiftly passing his sword under his adversary's, he sent it into the middle of the hedge.

"Well done! Bravo!" cried the sergeant. "I could not have sent it so far myself. If you could only take lessons of me for six months, you would be the best swordsman in France."

M. de Pont-Cassé desired to begin the combat again. The seconds were opposed to this, but my uncle said:

"No, gentlemen, the first time does not count, and there is no game without a return game. The reparation to which Monsieur is entitled must be complete."

The two adversaries put themselves on guard again. At the first thrust M. de Pont-Cassé's sword went flying into the road. As he ran to pick it up, Benjamin said to him with a sardonic smile:

"I beg your pardon, Count, for the trouble I gave you. But it is your own fault. Had you been willing to play chess, you would not have been bothered so often."

A third time the musketeer returned to the charge.

"Enough!" cried the seconds. "You are abusing M. Rathery's generosity."

"Not at all," said my uncle. "Monsieur undoubtedly wishes to learn the thrust. Permit me to give him another lesson."

The lesson was not long in coming, and M. de Pont-Cassé's sword escaped his hand the third time.

"At least," said my uncle, "you would have done well to bring a servant with you to go pick up your sword."

"You are the devil in person," said the vicomte. "I would rather have been killed by you than treated so ignominiously."

"And you, my nobleman," said Benjamin, turning to the other musketeer, "you see my barber is not here. Shall I keep my promise to you?"

"By no means," said the musketeer. "To you belong the honours of the day. There is no cowardice in giving up to you, since you do not use your sword against the defeated man. Although you are not a nobleman, I consider you the best swordsman and the most honourable man I know. Your adversary wanted to kill you, but you, though you had his life in your hands, respected it. If I were king, you should be a duke, at least, and member of the house of peers. And if you attach any value to my friendship, I offer it to you with all my heart and ask yours in exchange."

He held out his hand to my uncle, who shook it cordially. M. de Pont-Cassé stood before the fire, gloomy and sullen, as though a storm cloud were gathering on his brow. He took his friend's arm, gave my uncle a chilly salute, and left.

My uncle wanted to hurry back to his sister. But the report of his victory had spread rapidly through

the faubourg. At every step he was stopped by someone calling himself a friend and congratulated on his wonderful feat, and his arm was almost shaken from his shoulder. The urchins that each new event gathers in the streets swarmed about him and deafened him with their hurrahs. In a few moments he became the centre of a frightfully noisy crowd. They trod on his heels, spattered his silk stockings, and knocked his three-cornered hat into the mud. He was still able to exchange a few words with M. Minxit, but then Cicero, the drummer, whose acquaintance we have already made, to put a finishing touch to his triumph, placed himself at the head of the crowd and began to beat the charge hard enough to shatter the bridge of Beuvron. Benjamin even had to give him thirty sous for his din. The only thing lacking to complete his misfortune was a speech in his honour. That is how my uncle was rewarded for having risked his life in a duel.

"If," he said to himself, "I had given a few louis to a wretch dying of hunger in Croix-des-Michelins, all these fools applauding me here would let me go my way without a sound. My God, what is glory, and to whom does it go? The fuss they make about a name, is it so rare, so precious a blessing that peace, happiness, affection, the finest years of one's life, and sometimes the peace of the world, should be sacrificed for it? What sort of a person has not been pointed out to the public? The child that is carried to church to the ringing bells, the ox that is

led through the city decorated with flowers and ribbons, the six-footed calf, the stuffed boa-constrictor, the monster pumpkin, the tight-rope dancer, the aëronaut who makes an ascent, the juggler who swallows balls, the prince as he drives by, the bishop who blesses, the general who returns from a victorious campaign in a remote country—have not all of them had their moment of glory? You think you are celebrated because you have sown your ideas in the arid furrows of a book, or made men out of marble and passions out of ivory. But your fame would be far greater if you had a nose six inches long. As for the glory that survives us, I admit not everybody can attain it, but the difficulty is to enjoy it. Find a banker who discounts immortality, and from to-morrow on I will toil to make myself immortal."

My uncle wanted M. Minxit to stay to the family dinner at his sister's, but the good man, though his dear Benjamin stood before him safe, sound, and victorious, was sad and preoccupied. What my uncle had said to M. de Pont-Cassé in the morning kept recurring to his mind. He said a voice was ringing in his ears summoning him to Corvol. He felt nervous, like a man who is not accustomed to coffee and has drunk a strong cup. He was frequently obliged to leave the table and take a turn about the room. His extreme excitement frightened Benjamin, and he himself urged him to go back home.

CHAPTER XX

ABDUCTION AND DEATH OF MADEMOISELLE MINXIT

My uncle escorted M. Minxit as far as Croix-des-Michelins, and then returned to go to bed. He was in the complete oblivion of the first hours of sleep when he was awakened with a shock by a violent knocking at the outside door. He opened his window. Though the street was as dark as a deep ditch, he recognised M. Minxit, and thought he perceived indications of distress in his attitude. He ran to open the door. Scarcely had he drawn the bolt, when the good man threw himself into his arms and burst into tears.

"Well, what is it, Monsieur Minxit? Tell me. Tears are no good. Has anything happened to you?"

"Gone! Gone!" cried M. Minxit, choking with sobs. "Gone with him, Benjamin!"

"What, Arabella has gone with M. de Pont-Cassé?" said my uncle, divining at once what he meant.

"You were quite right in warning me against him. Why didn't you kill him?"

"There is still time for that," said Benjamin. "But first we must start in pursuit."

"Come with me, Benjamin. All my strength and courage is in you."

"Go with you! Of course I will, and directly. By the way, did it occur to you to take money?"

"I haven't a bit of cash, my friend. The poor girl carried off every bit there was in my secretary."

"So much the better," said my uncle. "You can at least be sure she will want for nothing until we catch her."

"As soon as it is light, I will go to my banker to get some funds."

"Yes," said my uncle, "do you think they will amuse themselves making love on the greensward by the roadside? When it is light, they will be far far away. You must go at once to awaken your banker, and knock at his door until he has counted out a thousand francs. You will have to pay twenty per cent. instead of fifteen, that is all."

"But what road have they taken? We must wait till daylight to make inquiries."

"Not at all," said my uncle. "They have taken the road to Paris. Paris is the only place M. de Pont-Cassé can go to. I have it on good authority that his leave of absence expires in a few days. I am going at once to get a carriage and two good horses. Join me at the Golden Lion."

As my uncle started to go out, M. Minxit said to him:

"You have nothing but your shirt on."

"Right," said Benjamin, "I forgot that. It was so dark I didn't notice it. But I shall be dressed in five minutes, and in twenty minutes I shall be at the Golden Lion. I will say good-bye to my dear sister when I return from the trip."

An hour later my uncle and M. Minxit were driving along the wretched road that then led from Clamecy to Auxerre in a rickety vehicle drawn by two jades. By daylight winter is tolerable, but at night it is horrible. With the utmost speed possible, it was not until ten o'clock in the morning that they arrived at Courson. Under the porch of La Levrette, the only tavern in the neighbourhood, a coffin was exposed, and a whole swarm of ugly, ragged old women were croaking around it.

"I have it from Gobi, the sexton," said one, "that the young lady promised three thousand francs to be distributed among the poor of the parish."

"We shall get some of that, Mother Simonne."

"If the young lady dies, as they say she will, the proprietor of La Levrette will take everything," answered a third. "We ought to go see the bailiff and get him to look after our inheritance."

My uncle took one of the old women aside and asked her to explain what it was all about. Proud at having been singled out by a stranger with a carriage and pair, she gave her companions a look of triumph, and said:

"You have done well to ask me, sir. I know

everything that happened better than they do. This morning the man in the coffin was in the green carriage you see yonder in the coach-house. He was a grand lord, worth millions, who was going with a young lady to Paris, to court perhaps, and he stopped here, and he will remain in that poor cemetery to rot along with the peasants he so despised. He was young and handsome, and I, old Manette, all worn out and good for nothing, will sprinkle holy water on his grave, and in ten years, if I live so long, his ashes will have to make room for my old bones. No matter how rich the grand gentlemen, sooner or later they have to go where we go. They may dress themselves in velvets and taffetas, but their last coat is always made of the planks of their coffin. They tend and perfume their skin, but the earthworms are made for them as well as for us. To think that I, the old washerwoman, shall be able to go, when I like, to squat on a nobleman's grave. Oh, my dear sir, the thought does us good. It consoles us for being poor, and avenges us for not being nobles. However, it is really his fault that he is dead. He wanted to take a traveller's room because it was the finest in the tavern, and the two quarrelled over it, so they went to fight in the garden of La Levrette, and the traveller put a ball through his head. The young lady, it seems, was with child, poor thing. When she heard her husband was dead, she was taken in labour, and is scarcely better off than her noble

How Rathery catches
up the fainting Minxit and tries
in vain to calm him
13

husband. Doctor Débrit left her room just now. I do his washing, and I asked how the young lady was, and he said, 'Ah, Mother Manette, I would rather be in your old wrinkled skin than in hers.' "

"And this lord," said my uncle, "wasn't he wearing a red coat, a light wig, and three plumes in his hat?"

"Yes, sir. Do you know him?"

"No," said my uncle, "but I may have seen him somewhere."

"And the young lady," said M. Minxit, "is she not tall and freckled?"

"She is about five feet three inches," answered the old woman, "and has a skin like the shell of a turkey's egg."

M. Minxit fainted.

Benjamin carried M. Minxit to his bed, and bled him. Then he asked to be taken to Arabella; for the beautiful lady dying in the pains of childbirth was M. Minxit's daughter. She was occupying the room that her lover had obtained at the cost of his life—a gloomy room, indeed, the possession of which was scarcely worth quarrelling about.

Arabella lay in a bed draped in green serge. My uncle drew the curtains aside and looked at her for some time in silence. A moist marble pallor had spread over her face. Her half-open eyes were faded and expressionless. Her breath escaped in sobs. Benjamin lifted her arm lying motionless at

her side. Having felt her pulse, he shook his head sadly, and ordered the nurse to go for Dr. Débrit. Hearing his voice, Arabella trembled like a corpse under the influence of a galvanic current.

"Where am I?" she said, throwing a wild look about her. "Was it a nightmare? Do I hear you, Monsieur Rathery, and am I still at Corvol in my father's house?"

"You are not in your father's house," said my uncle, "but your father is here. He is ready to forgive you. All he asks of you is to live so that he may live too."

Arabella's eyes chanced to fall upon M. de Pont-Cassé's uniform, which was hanging on the wall still soaked in blood. She tried to sit up in bed, but her limbs twisted in a horrible convulsion, and she fell back heavily, like a corpse that has been raised in its coffin. Benjamin placed his hand upon her heart. It was no longer beating. He held a mirror to her lips; the glass remained clear. Misery and happiness were all over for poor Arabella. Benjamin stood erect at her bedside, holding her hand in his, plunged in bitter reflections.

Just then a heavy, uncertain step was heard on the stairs. Benjamin hastened to turn the key in the lock. It was M. Minxit, who knocked at the door, and cried:

"It is I, Benjamin. Open the door. I want to see my daughter. I must see her. She cannot die until I have seen her."

There is cruelty in making believe that a dead person is still alive and active. My uncle, however, did not shrink from this necessity.

"Go away, Monsieur Minxit, I beg of you. Arabella is better. She is resting. Your coming in suddenly might bring on a crisis that would kill her."

"I tell you, wretch, I want to see my daughter," cried M. Minxit, and he threw himself with such violence against the door that the staple of the lock fell to the floor.

"Well," said Benjamin, hoping still to deceive him, "you see your daughter is sleeping quietly. Are you satisfied now, and will you go away?"

The unhappy old man threw a glance at his daughter.

"You are lying," he cried, in a voice that made Benjamin tremble. "She is not asleep, she is dead!"

He threw himself upon her body and pressed her convulsively to his breast.

"Arabella!" he cried. "Arabella! Arabella! Oh, was it this way that I was to find you again? My daughter, my only child! God lets the murderer's hair grow, and from a father he takes his only child. How can they tell us that God is good and just?" Then his grief changed into anger against my uncle. "It is you, you miserable Rathery, who made me refuse her to M. de Pont-Cassé. But for you she would be married and full of life."

"Are you joking?" said my uncle. "Is it my

fault that she fell in love with a musketeer?"

All passions are nothing but blood rushing to the brain. M. Minxit's reason had doubtless given way under his terrible grief, and in the paroxysm of his delirium the vein from which my uncle had just bled him reopened. Benjamin allowed the blood to flow, and soon a salutary swoon succeeded this superabundance of life and saved the poor old man. Benjamin gave orders to the proprietor of La Levrette for Arabella and her lover to receive an honourable burial, and also gave him the money with which to carry out his orders. Then he came back to station himself at M. Minxit's bedside, and watched over him like a mother over her sick child. M. Minxit hung three days between life and the grave, but, thanks to my uncle's skilful, affectionate care, the fever devouring him gradually disappeared, and soon he was in a condition to be transferred to Corvol.

CHAPTER XXI

A FINAL FESTIVAL

Monsieur Minxit had one of those antediluvian constitutions which seem made of more solid material than our own. It was one of those deep-rooted plants that keep a vigourous vegetation when winter has withered the others. Wrinkles had been unable to ruffle his granite brow. Years had accumulated upon his head without leaving any trace of decline. He had remained young till past his sixtieth year, and his winter, like that of the tropics, was still full of sap and flowers. But time and misfortune forget nobody.

His daughter's death, coming upon her flight and the revelation of her pregnancy dealt the strong organism a mortal blow. A slow fever was silently undermining M. Minxit. He had renounced those noisy pleasures which had made his life one long festivity. He put aside medicine as a useless encumbrance. The companions of his long period of youth respected his sorrow, and ceased to see him without ceasing to love him. His house was silent and sealed as a tomb. Its occupants could scarcely snatch a few stealthy glimpses of the village

through the blinds that were only occasionally half-opened. The yard no longer rang with the noise of people going and coming. The early spring weeds choked the drive, and high plants growing along the walls formed a circle of verdure.

The poor soul in mourning needed nothing now but obscurity and silence. He did what the wild beast does that retires into the gloomiest depths of its forest when it wishes to die. My uncle's gaiety proved powerless to overcome this incurable melancholy. M. Minxit answered only with a sad, gloomy smile, as much as to say that he understood and thanked my uncle for his good intentions.

My uncle had counted on the spring to bring him back to life. But the spring, which dresses the dry earth anew in flowers and verdure, cannot revive a grief-stricken soul, and while everything else was being born again, the poor man was slowly dying.

It was an evening in the month of May. M. Minxit was walking in his field, resting on Benjamin's arm. The sky was clear, the earth was green and fragrant, the nightingales were singing in the poplars, the dragonflies were hovering among the reeds of the brook, their wings making a melodious buzzing, and the water, all covered with hawthorn blossoms, was murmuring under the roots of the willows.

"A fine evening," said Benjamin, trying to rouse M. Minxit from the gloomy revery that shrouded his mind.

Minait and Rathery
in the Field and how Rathery repels
the Priest

"Yes," he answered, "a fine evening for a poor peasant who walks along between the flowering hedges with his pick on his shoulder, on his way to his smoking hut, where his children are waiting for him. But there are no more fine evenings for the father mourning his daughter."

"At what fireside is there not some vacant chair?" said my uncle. "Who has not some grassy hillock in the cemetery where he comes every year on All Saints' day to shed pious tears? And in the streets of the city what throng, however pink and gilded, is not spotted with black? When sons grow old, they are condemned to put their old parents in the grave. When they die in their prime, they leave a desolate mother on her knees beside their coffin. Believe me, man's eyes were made much less for seeing than for weeping, and every soul has its wound, just as every plant has its canker. But God has also sowed forgetfulness in the path of life. It follows death with slow steps, effacing the epitaphs death has traced and repairing the ruins death has made. Are you willing, my dear Monsieur Minxit, to follow a piece of good advice? Then go eat carp on the shores of Lake Geneva, macaroni at Naples, drink sherry wine at Cadiz, and taste ices at Constantinople. In a year you will come back as fat and round as you used to be."

M. Minxit allowed my uncle to harangue him as long as he liked, and when he finished said to him:

"How many days have I still to live, Benjamin?"

"Why?" said my uncle, amazed at the question and thinking he had misunderstood him. "What do you mean, Monsieur Minxit?"

"I ask you," repeated M. Minxit, "how many days have I still to live?"

"The devil!" said my uncle. "A very embarrassing question. On the one hand, I should not like to disoblige you; but, on the other hand, I do not know whether prudence permits me to satisfy your desire. They tell the condemned man of his execution only a few hours before his journey to the scaffold, and you——"

"It is a service," interrupted M. Minxit, "that I impose upon your friendship, because you alone can render it. The traveller must know at what hour he is to start, so that he may pack his trunk."

"Do you wish me to speak frankly and sincerely, Monsieur Minxit? Will you, on your honour, not be frightened at the sentence I shall utter?"

"I give you my word of honour," said M. Minxit.

"Well, then," said my uncle, "I will speak as if it were myself."

He examined the old man's dried-up face, his dim, dull eyes which reflected only a few gleams of light, his pulse, as if listening to its beating with his fingers. For some time he was silent, then he said:

"To-day is Thursday. Well, on Monday there will be one house more in mourning in Corvol."

"A very good diagnosis," said M. Minxit. "I thought so myself. If you ever find an opportunity

to introduce yourself, I predict you will become one of our medical celebrities. But does Sunday belong to me entirely?"

"It belongs to you from the beginning to the end, provided you do nothing to hurry the end of your days."

"I have nothing more to do," said M. Minxit. "Now do me the favour to invite our friends for Sunday to a festive dinner. I do not wish to go away on bad terms with life, and it is with the glass in my hand that I desire to take leave. You must insist on their acceptance of my invitation. If necessary, tell them it is their duty."

"I will go to invite them myself," said my uncle, "and I guarantee that none of them shall fail you."

"Now, let us take up something very different. I do not want to be buried in the churchyard. It is in a valley, and is cold and damp, and the shadow of the church lies on it like a crape veil. I should be uncomfortable in there, and you know I like my ease. I want you to bury me in my field, at the edge of this brook whose song I love so." He tore up a handful of grass, and said, "See, here is the spot where I wish you to dig my last resting-place. Plant a bower of vines here and honeysuckles, so that the verdure may be mingled with flowers, and come here sometimes to dream of your old friend. To make you come oftener, and also so as not to disturb my sleep, I leave you this estate and all my other property. But on two conditions. First, that you live

in the house that I am about to leave empty; second, that you continue to attend my patients as I attended them for thirty years."

"I accept this double inheritance with gratitude," said my uncle, "but I warn you I will not go to the fairs."

"Granted," answered M. Minxit.

"As for your patients," added Benjamin, "I will treat them conscientiously and according to the system of Tissot, which seems to me founded on experience and reason. The first one of them to leave this world shall bring you news of me."

"I feel the cold of evening creeping over me. It is time to say farewell to this sky, to these old trees which will never see me again, to these little songsters, for we shall not come back here till Monday morning."

The next day he shut himself up with his friend, the notary. The day after he grew weaker and weaker and kept his bed. But on Sunday he rose, had himself powdered, and donned his best coat. Benjamin, according to his promise, had gone to Clamecy to extend the invitations, and not one of the friends failed to respond to this funeral call. At four o'clock they found themselves all gathered in the drawing-room.

M. Minxit was not slow in making his appearance, tottering and resting on my uncle's arm. He shook hands with all of them, and thanked them affectionately for having given in to his last wish,

which was, he said, the caprice of a dying man.

This man whom they had seen a short time before so gay, so happy, and so full of life, had been broken down by grief. Old age had come upon him at one stroke. At sight of him all shed tears. Arthus suddenly felt his appetite going.

A servant announced that dinner was ready. M. Minxit seated himself as usual at the head of the table.

"Gentlemen," said he to his guests, "this dinner is my last. I wish my last looks to meet nothing but full glasses and merry faces. If you wish to please me, you will give free rein to your usual gaiety."

He poured out a few drops of Burgundy, and held out his glass to his guests. They all said together:

"To M. Minxit's health!"

"No," said M. Minxit, "not to my health. Of what use is a wish that cannot be gratified? But to your health, to you all, to your prosperity, to your happiness, and may God keep those of you who have children from losing them!"

"M. Minxit," said Guillerand, "has taken things too much to heart. I should not have thought him capable of dying of sorrow. I too lost a daughter, a daughter whom I placed at school with the Sisters. It pained me for a time, but now I am none the worse for it, and sometimes, I confess, the thought occurs to me that I no longer have to pay her board."

"A bottle broken in your wine-cellar," said Arthus, "or a scholar taken from your school would have caused you more sorrow."

"It well becomes you," said Millot, "to talk that way, you, Arthus who fear no misfortune except the loss of your appetite."

"I have more bowels than you, song-maker," answered Arthus.

"Yes, for digestive purposes," said the poet.

"Well, it is of some value to be able to digest well," replied Arthus. "At least, when you go in a cart, your friends are not obliged to fasten you to the cart-stakes for fear of losing you on the way."

"Arthus," said Millot, "no personalities, I pray you."

"I know that you bear me ill-will," answered Arthus, "because I fell on you on the way from Corvol. But sing me your *Grand-Noël* and we shall be quits."

"And I maintain my song is a fine bit of poesy. Would you like me to show you a letter from Monseigneur the bishop who compliments me upon it?"

"Just put your song on the gridiron, and we shall see what it is worth."

"I recognise you there, Arthus. Nothing has any value for you that isn't roasted or boiled."

"What's wrong with that? My sensitiveness resides in my palate, and I like to have it there as well as anywhere else. Is a solidly organised digestive apparatus worth less for purposes of happiness

M. Millot Rataut

than a highly developed brain? That is the question."

"If we should leave it to a duck or a pig, I do not doubt they would decide it in your favour. But I'll ask Benjamin to be judge."

"Your song suits me very well," said my uncle:

"'Down on your knees, O Christians, down!'

That is superb. What Christian could refuse to kneel when you invite him to do so twice in a line of eight syllables? But I am of Arthus' opinion. I prefer a cutlet in papers."

"A joke is not a reply," said Millot.

"Well, do you think there is any moral sorrow that causes as much suffering as toothache or earache? If the body suffers more keenly than the soul, it must likewise enjoy more energetically. That is logic. Pain and pleasure result from the same faculty."

"The fact is," said M. Minxit, "that if I had my choice between M. Arthus' stomach and the over-oxygenated brain of J. J. Rousseau, I should take M. Arthus' stomach. Sensitiveness is the faculty of suffering. To be sensitive is to walk barefooted over the sharp pebbles of life, to go through the crowd with an open wound in your side and the people jostling against you. Man's unhappiness consists of unsatisfied desires. Now, every soul that feels too keenly is a balloon aspiring to mount to

heaven but unable to ascend beyond the limits of the atmosphere. Give a man good health and a good appetite, and put his soul to sleep forever, and he will be the happiest being in all creation. To develop his intelligence is to sow thorns in his life. The peasant who plays at skittles is happier than the intellectual who reads a fine book."

A general silence followed these words.

"Parlanta," said M. Minxit, "how does my case stand against Malthus?"

"We have a warrant for his arrest," said the sheriff's officer.

"Throw all the documents into the fire, and Benjamin will pay you your expenses. And you, Rapin, how is my affair with the clergy about my music coming on?"

"The case has been postponed for a week," said Rapin.

"Then I will be sentenced by default," answered M. Minxit.

"But there may be a heavy fine," said Rapin. "The sexton testified that the sergeant insulted the vicar when he ordered him and his band to clear the square in front of the church."

"That's not true," said the sergeant. "I only ordered the band to play the air, 'Where are you going, Monsieur Abbé?' "

"In that case," said M. Minxit, "Benjamin will give the sexton a drubbing at the first opportunity that offers itself. I want the scamp to remember me."

They had reached the dessert. M. Minxit had a punch made and poured a few drops of the flaming liquor into his glass.

"That's bad for you, Monsieur Minxit," said Machecourt.

"What can be bad for me now, my good Machecourt? I must say good-bye to all that has been dear to me in life."

His strength was rapidly declining, and his voice was very weak.

"Gentlemen," he said, "do you know what I have invited you for? I have invited you to my funeral. I have had beds prepared for all of you, so that you may be ready to-morrow morning to escort me to my last resting-place. I don't want anyone to weep over my death. Wear roses in your coats instead of crape, and, after wetting the leaves in a glass of champagne, strew them over my grave. It is the recovery of a sick man, the release of a prisoner from his captivity, that you will be celebrating. By the way, which of you will pronounce my funeral oration?"

"It ought to be Page," said some.

"No," answered M. Minxit, "Page is a lawyer, and at the grave one must tell the truth. I prefer Benjamin."

"I?" said my uncle. "You know I am no orator."

"You are a good enough orator for me," answered M. Minxit. "Come, speak as though I were already lying in my coffin. It will give me great

pleasure to hear what posterity will say of me while I am still alive."

"I really don't know what to say," said Benjamin.

"Say what you like, but hurry up, for I feel I am dying."

"Well," said my uncle, " 'the loss of the man whom we are laying under this foliage will be universally lamented.' "

" 'Universally lamented' is not good," said M. Minxit. "No man is universally lamented. It's a lie fit to be spoken only from a pulpit."

"Do you prefer 'He leaves behind him friends who will mourn him a long time'?"

"That's less pretentious, but no more exact. For one friend who loves us loyally and without reservation, we have twenty secret enemies who, like a hunter in ambush, await in silence an opportunity to injure us. I am sure there are in this village many people who will be glad I have died."

"Well, 'He leaves behind him inconsolable friends,' " said my uncle.

" 'Inconsolable' is still a lie," answered M. Minxit. "We doctors don't know what part of our organism it is that grief settles in, nor how it makes us suffer. But it is a disease that is cured without treatment and very quickly. Most griefs are only slight scabs on the heart that fall almost as soon as they form. None are inconsolable except fathers and mothers who have children in the grave."

" 'Who will long preserve your memory.' Does that suit you better?"

"That's all right," said M. Minxit. "And that you may preserve this memory of me the longer I am bequeathing in perpetuity a fund for a dinner to be given at each anniversary of my death, which all of you are to attend as long as you remain in this part of the country. I have made Benjamin the executor of my will."

"That's better than a mere service," said my uncle, and continued, " 'I will not speak to you of his virtues.' "

"Say 'qualities,' " said M. Minxit. "That smacks less of an exaggeration."

" 'Nor of his talents. You have all had occasion to appreciate them.' "

"Especially Arthus, from whom I have won forty-five bottles of beer at billiards within the last year."

" 'I will not tell you that he was a good father. You all know that he died loving his daughter too much.' "

"Alas! Would to Heaven that were true!" answered M. Minxit. "But the deplorable truth, which I cannot conceal, is that my daughter died because I did not love her enough. I acted toward her like an execrable egoist. She loved a nobleman, and I did not want her to marry him because I detested noblemen. She did not love Benjamin, and I wanted him to become my son-in-law because

I loved him. But I hope God will pardon me. We are not responsible for our passions, and it is our passions that govern our reason. We must obey the instincts God has given us, as the duck obeys the peremptory instinct which pulls it to the river."

" 'He was a good son,' " continued my uncle.

"What do you know about that?" said M. Minxit. "That's the way epitaphs and funeral orations are made. The paths in our cemeteries lined with graves and cypresses are like the columns of a newspaper—full of lies and falsehoods. The fact is I never knew either my father or my mother, and it has not been clearly established that I was born of the union of a man and a woman. But I have never complained of having been abandoned. It did not prevent me from making my way. If I had had a family I should perhaps not have gone so far. A family hinders and thwarts you in a thousand ways. You must act according to its ideas, and not according to your own, you are not free to follow your vocation, and it often turns you into a path where you get stuck in the mud at the very first step you take."

" 'He was a good husband,' " said my uncle.

"I am not so sure of that," said M. Minxit. "I married my wife without loving her, and I never loved her much; but she always had her way with me. When she wanted a dress she bought one. When a servant displeased her she discharged him. If that makes a good husband so much the better.

But I shall soon know what God thinks about it."

" 'He has been a good citizen,' " said my uncle. " 'You have been witnesses of the zeal with which he has laboured to spread ideas of reform and liberty among the people.' "

"You can say that now without compromising me."

" 'I will not say that he was a good friend.' "

"What will you say then?" said M. Minxit.

"A moment's patience," said Benjamin. " 'He has succeeded in winning the favour of fortune by his intelligence.' "

"Not exactly my intelligence," said M. Minxit, "although it's just as good as somebody else's. I have profited by men's credulity. That requires audacity rather than intelligence."

" 'And his wealth has always been at the service of the unfortunate.' "

M. Minxit gave a sign of assent.

" 'He has lived like a philosopher, enjoying life and making the people around him enjoy it, and he died like a philosopher, too, after a grand feast, surrounded by his friends. Wayfarers, drop a flower on his grave.' "

"That's pretty nearly right," said M. Minxit. "Now, gentlemen, let's drink the parting glass and wish me a pleasant journey."

He ordered the sergeant to carry him to his bed. My uncle wanted to follow him, but he would not

hear of it, and insisted that they should all remain at table until the next day.

An hour later he sent for Benjamin, who hurried to his bedside. M. Minxit had only time to take his hand, and then he expired.

The next morning, as M. Minxit's coffin, surrounded by his friends and followed by a long procession of peasants, was about to be taken out of the house, the priest appeared at the door, and ordered the bearers to take the body to the churchyard.

"But M. Minxit does not want to go to the churchyard," said my uncle. "He is going to his field, and no one has a right to interfere."

The priest protested that the remains of a Christian must rest only in consecrated ground.

"Is the ground to which we carry M. Minxit less consecrated than yours? Do not the flowers and the grass grow there as well as in the churchyard?"

"Do you want your friend to be damned?" asked the priest.

"Allow me," said my uncle. "M. Minxit has been in the presence of God since yesterday, and unless his case has been postponed for a week, he has already been judged. If he has been damned, your funeral ceremony cannot revoke his sentence, and if he has been saved, then what is the use of the ceremony?"

The priest cried that Benjamin was an impious man, and ordered the peasants to leave. All obeyed,

and the bearers were disposed to follow their example. But my uncle drew his sword and said:

"The bearers have been paid to carry the body to its last resting-place, and they must earn their money. If they do their work right, they will each get half a crown, but if anyone shirks, I will beat him with the flat of my sword till he falls to the ground."

The bearers gave in, more frightened by Benjamin's threats than even by the priest's, and M. Minxit was laid in his grave with all the formalities Benjamin prescribed.

On his return from the funeral, my uncle had an income of ten thousand francs. We shall see later, perhaps, what use he made of his fortune.

THE END